

주 변 도 없는 회 귀

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KW

Possessing Nothing

– 쥐뿔도 없는 회귀 –

- Part 3 -

-Author-

목마

[Chamber's Cleanup Service]

Chapter 49

Encounter (1)

(T/N: Please deal with the change in names. I'm sorry.)
(traitorAIZEN: different TL group)

“Sorry for being late.”

In actuality, here was no need to say that. Nevel had only been gone for five minutes, after all. As always, he took a deep bow towards Sungmin and spoke.

“I have come in contact with the blacksmith. The other side wished for a conversation. Is right now fine?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Understood.”

Nevel raised his hand at Lee Sungming’s answer. When he slashed down with one of his long fingers, the scenery cracked apart.

“I’ll leave this place for now, then.”

After saying that, Nevel disappeared into Sungmin’s shadow. Sungmin didn’t understand what just happened, and only blankly stared at the gap in space.

“Quite young.”

He heard a voice. The one who stood up from behind the spatial crack was a dark elf with murky blonde hair. At first, Sungmin didn’t realize that she was a dark elf. It was the first time he saw one, after all.

“Don’t be so surprised.”

Seeing Sungmin’s surprised expression, the dark elf laughed. She brushed her hair and spoke.

"Selgerus. I don't know how many times I'll see you in the future, but we should know each other's names at least. Don't you think so?"

"...Uh... I'm Lee Sungmin."

Sungmin stuttered his name. Elves and dark elves were classified as sub-humans – beings other than humans that possess intelligence. Strictly speaking, orcs were capable of communication, and were classified as sub-humans, but most people classify orcs as monsters. After all, the term 'sub-human' was created by humans.

"What weapon do you use?"

Asked Selgerus. She had baggy work clothes on, as well as a large apron. However, due to her muscle development, her body figure could be seen through the baggy clothes.

"I use... the spear."

He was supposed to be introduced to a blacksmith, but never did he imagine that the blacksmith would be a female, much less a dark elf. This made Sungmin surprised. In his head, the image of a blacksmith was a muscular, big male, or a dwarf if it was a sub-human. Of course, it wasn't like he saw a dwarf for real anyway. Sub-humans were small in number and were hard to find.

"Spear. The spear, huh... is there a particular shape you prefer?"

"...Something like this."

Sungmin took out the spear from his interspatial pocket. Selgerus nodded his head after looking at the spear.

"It's the martial world style. A martial artist?"

"I'm not from the martial world though..."

"Can you show me what spear techniques you use?"

(T/N: martial world may have been translated as 'murim' or 'wu lin' before)

Asked Selgerus. Hearing that, Sungmin hesitated a little. Demonstrating one's martial techniques was a taboo for martial artists after all.

"Why. You don't want to?"

"...Is it necessary?"

“It is necessary.”

Replied Selgerus without hesitation.

“I need to know what kind of techniques you use and create a spear that matches it”

“You mean you can match it after seeing my martial arts?”

“You seem to be mistaken on something.”

Selgerus laughed. It was as though she was laughing at Lee Sungmin’s ignorance.

“I’m not a martial artist. I’m a blacksmith. My job is not to comprehend what kind of martial arts you are using, but to comprehend the you that is using the martial art. The way you swing the spear, the way you hold the spear, the way you use the spear. I’m going to use that. If you don’t want to, then it’s fine if you don’t. For me, I just need to craft the spear with the money I was given.”

Only then Lee Sungmin understand what Nevel was trying to say before. Either lower your standards, or lower your pride; that blacksmiths are all stubborn. He took a deep breath and replied.

“Understood.”

“You’re quite quick to the catch. I thought you’d be more stubborn. You don’t suspect me?”

“I do not know you, but I trust a little in Erebris that connected you to me.”

Since he hadn’t used Erebris properly, he couldn’t totally believe in it. However, Erebris was something that even the God of suffering and trials, Msh, was using. Although he couldn’t know for sure, Erebris should have that much worth.

“I’m 400 years old.”

Selgerus suddenly spoke. 400 years old. Lee Sungmin’s eyes trembled hearing that unrealistic number. However, he wasn’t that surprised. He knew well that elves and dark elves had long lifespans.

“I started hammering since I liked to. That was around 350 years ago. Of course, my starting point was different from dwarves who are innately blacksmiths, but... My 350 years as a blacksmith is definitely real. Do you know why I’m saying this?”

“I don’t.”

"What you need to trust in is not Erebris, but me."

Selgerus smiled bitterly.

"Well, I know that it's funny for me to say this to someone I've just met."

Sungmin bit his lips after hearing that. What moved his heart was not when she told him to trust her, it was that their starting points were different.

The race of dwarves were born talented in smithing. All of their products are top-tier. Dwarves, just by being dwarves, receive the love from the god of passion and flames, Ather, and the god of the land and creation, Gaën. An item created by a young dwarf was miles better than a human crafter that had practiced for decades.

Compared to that, the 350 years of hammering from the dark elf Selgerus may mean nothing. However, the 350 years of her work was the real deal. The starting point was different – the talent possessed was different. This was something that Sungmin was agonized over several times.

"I will trust in you."

Sungmin came to a decision and raised his spear above his head. When he started demonstrating, Selgerus was surprised instead. Until now, she had met many people through Erebris, but there weren't many martial artists who showed their arts just because she asked.

To a martial artist, a martial art was a technique to kill the enemy, and a technique to protect oneself. Considering that, it would be difficult for them to demonstrate it to others. Selgerus did tell Sungmin to show her his techniques, but didn't expect him to actually do so.

First, he started with the three basics moves of the spear; deflect, block and pierce. Starting from the three moves, he then continued into the Nine Skies Infinity Spear. He didn't just do that though, he mixed it with Shadowless Phantom. In practice, he would use his stepping techniques along with spear techniques. After all, it wasn't like the enemy was going to stand still.

Selgerus silently watched as Lee Sungmin swung his spear. Only after a long time did his spear demonstration end. Selgerus observed all of it without blinking even once,

and spoke.

“You trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Because I asked you to?”

“Because you said your 350 years of effort was real.”

Selgerus laughed at his answer.

“Aren’t you too easily trusting?”

“It’s the first time I’ve heard that. I’ve always heard that I’m uselessly doubtful though.”

“I guess I can’t betray your trust then.”

Selegerus giggled and took out her hands from the apron.

“27 million erre. I’m usually strict with payments, but I feel good today, so I’ll make you something worth more. Though, it would take some time.”

“That doesn’t matter to me.”

“I think you’ll be a fine regular customer.”

Selgerus shrugged her shoulders.

“As long as you don’t die, that is.”

The spatial gap closed up. Not long after, Nevel appeared from inside Sungmin’s shadow. He took a deep bow and asked.

“Is the blacksmith I mediated for you to your liking?”

“She said I’ll be a fine regular customer.”

Hearing his answer, Nevel made a weird expression. After observing Sungmin for a while, he spoke. (*T/N: is it ‘he’?*)

“There are things called first impressions, or biases. Actually, Miss Selgerus is not the style of blacksmith that people prefer.”

“Because she’s a dark elf?”

“Yes. As I have told you, we, Erebris, only provide the best among the things that our members want. The best blacksmith... most members think of dwarves when they think of one. A dark elf, much less a female one, is out of the question.”

Nevel smield bitterly while saying that.

"The reason why I connected you, sir Lee Sungmin, to Miss Selgerus, was also because of that. She is not usually preferred as a blacksmith, and is usually underevaluated compared to her skills. Thanks to that, she's also on the cheaper side compared to blacksmiths of her level."

"As long as her skills are real, I do not care."

Seeing Sungmin nonchalantly reply like that, Nevel giggled.

"Did I not say so? That we only provide you with the best. Miss Selgerus's skils are indeed real. She is the first dark elf to earn the title of a meister. Originally, Miss Selgerus does not like customers that we bring her, but... if she said that you'll become her regular, then she'll most definitely create the best of weapons for you, sir. Oh, under the 27 million erre line of course."

"You mean she won't do more than that?"

"That is up to her to decide. After all, we're only mediators."

Sungmin nodded his head at Nevel's reply. After a bit of silence, he asked something else.

"I wish to ask about quests that can be received as a mercenary. I heard that Erebris takes 5% as mediation fee, but if I accept a quest through Erebris, what happens to the mercenary guild's fee?"

"It will be waived."

Nevel replied immediately.

"The fee that Erebris takes includes the mercenary guild fee. The rewards are also given not through the tuild, but through us."

"What about the achievement records then?"

"That is automatically updated on the mercenary guild. Would you like to check?"

"No, it's fine for now. I don't have a rank tile yet."

"It'll probably arrive soon. I will organize a list of decent S-rank quests for you."

"Is that for free?"

"You're my exclusive member, so I can do you that much. And also..."

Nevel stared at Sungmin's face for a while.

“Somehow, the more I face you... the more I feel like I should help you. It’s just a feeling, but... this is quite strange.”

“It’s the first time I’ve heard of that.”

“It’s just what I feel after all. Isn’t there something called goodwill? It is sudden, and there is no reason for it. It’s not like you feel goodwill towards someone for any reason, right?”

After saying that, he laughed.

“Then I’ll see you next time.”

Nevel disappeared. Sungmin felt slightly weird after listening to Nevel’s words. Goodwill? He didn’t think that Nevel was into men, but felt strange because this was the first time he heard such words.

And thinking about it.

He felt that he was strangely lucky until now. Whether it was Jack, Hans, Wiji Hoyeon, Baek Sogo, etc. the people who were quite deeply relate to him all showed him good intentions.

There are no coincidences.

What Msh told him not to forget kept rolling around in his head.

Chapter 50

Encounter (2)

That day, Sungmin practiced his spear techniques in his back yard, and only returned to his house late at night. Although it was a little dusty since it wasn't cleaned, there were no problems after he cleaned it up.

There was a kitchen, but he didn't make food. He had food in his interspatial pocket. After eating, he started circulating the Purple Cloud Divine Art.

Entering the world of cultivation, Sungmin naturally remembered back to the fight with the ogre. This was his first fight as a peak-level expert ever since he climbed down from the mountain, no, across all of his two lives.

(T/N: *The power levels in Korean wuxia tend to go from: 3rd rate(三流) – 2nd rate(二流) – 1st rate(一流) – Peak(絕頂) (MC's current level) – Exceed(超絕頂). If you don't like that last one, I'm open to suggestions.*)

He felt many things. He even felt weird. The biggest problem was his proficiency. The three years in the mountain made his body 'used to' all the restraints. Thanks to that, the lack of prohibitions made him feel incongruent, and he felt yet again incompatible due to the difference from the time when he was not a peak-level expert.

He had to get used to this.

There were a lot of problems. His body right now was very unbalanced. When he lived in the mountains, he tried to balance nutrition as much as possible, but the prohibition of taste made all meals taste horrific. Thanks to that, the quantity of his meals decreased.

It wasn't just his meals. He couldn't sleep for a long time nor could he sleep deeply. That went on for two years. With the prohibitions on his smell, hearing, and sight, those three senses didn't develop well either. Only the sense of touch was indiscriminately developed.

There weren't only disadvantages though. By sealing other senses, a sense that didn't exist developed within him.

The sixth sense.

This existed as a skill inside his status window as well.

-Sixth sense.

You can sense what you cannot see with your eyes; cannot hear with your ears; and cannot smell through your nose.

The passive skill, sixth sense, had a vague explanation like all passive skills did. However, what he was feeling was very real. Although his senses were vague just as the description was, sixth sense did exist.

'But I cannot rely on sixth sense and touch alone.'

There was a need to train in the other senses. He didn't have to go as far as to 'train' them, but he at least had to set the unbalance between the senses right.

Purple Cloud Divine Art was maintained and his qi kept circulating. He breathed in regular intervals and as he did so, his thoughts started fading. He drove his consciousness to sleep in the state of thoughtlessness. The reason he was able to hold on to his impoverished psyche was thanks to mind cleaning magic and the Purple Cloud Divine Art.

The next day.

Lee Sungmin headed to the mercenary guild from early morning. He thought that his rank tile would be out since a day had passed. He was planning to receive the rank tile, and check on any quests he could get from the mercenary guild.

The Behengerr mercenary guild was crowded early in the morning. It was thanks to the mercenaries that had come for breakfast, or due to some of them drinking overnight. When Sungmin entered through the door, the mercenaries' commotion suddenly died down. They watched as Sungmin walked in, before starting to whisper amongst themselves.

Sungmin had become a famous person in the Behengerr mercenary guild. He

projected sword qi the day he joined, and exterminated an ogre chimera and showed that he was more powerful than an S-rank. Moreover, he was still 18 years old, so it was natural for them to take interest in him.

“So you’ve come.”

Bern was at the bar from the early morning. He spoke to Sungmin who approached him and put his hand in his pocket.

“Nice timing. Your rank tile just came out.”

“I’m here to get that.”

Spoke Sungmin with a smile. The rank tile he received from Bern had an engraving of a gold ‘S’ character. He fidgeted with it for a while before thinking back to the rank tile he had in his previous life.

‘At that time, it was a copper C...’

Seeing him laugh, Bern spoke.

“S-rank mercenaries are given 5 million erre per month as support. It’s more than enough to live on.”

He didn’t have to take any quests, and he would still get 5 million erre per month. S-rank mercenaries had that much value just by existing. Even though Eria was wide and summoned all sorts of people from all sorts of dimensions, a peak-level expert or mage that was able to get an S-rank mercenary tile was not that frequent.

“What happened to the ogre chimera’s body?”

“Hm?”

Bern widened his eyes after hearing Sungmin’s question. His expression said that he never imagined that Sungmin would ask something like that. After looking at Sungmin’s face for a while, Bern shrugged his shoulders.

“We’re investigating into it. Although nothing special was discovered until now... there’s a high chance that a black magician is involved in this.”

“You mean there was a black magician nearby?”

“I presume so. In the first place, that forest is not a suitable place for orcs to have as

their territory. It would be reasonable to think that a black magician created a chimera out of an ogre and released it into the woods.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Are you asking my opinion as a guild master? Or as a mage?”

“Both.”

There was a reason Sungmin was asking Bern about this. Bern was the head of Behengerr mercenary guild branch, and a very capable mage at the same time. Being asked that by Sungmin, Bern stayed silent for a moment before speaking.

“He wanted to test something.”

“Test... you say?”

“The chimera’s mouth was sewn shut. It was unable to take any meals. Ogres aren’t that barbaric amongst monsters. They have a very high reason. They don’t assault villages because they’re afraid of expeditions.”

He heard about that from Roode already. Bern saw that Sungmin was not saying anything and kept listening, so he spoke on.

“Starved monsters become very violent. Humans become weak in the face of hunger... but in the case of monsters, it’s the opposite. They become stronger and even more violent. Do you know why? It is to survive. Only the strong and the violent can hunt.”

“So, that’s why the ogre’s mouth was intentionally shut?”

“It was in order to force it to starve. If you were a few days late, a village would have disappeared. Or... the black magician would have recollected the ogre.”

Sungmin thought that it would be the latter. That was because he had never heard the news of a village being wiped out by an ogre in his previous life. As Bern said, the black magician probably released the ogre into the woods and forced it to starve and observed its actions. Then, he would have collected it back before it could cause any trouble.

‘It changed.’

In his previous life, the ogre chimera was not killed. But this time, it was. Wouldn’t this become a variable? Sungmin was worried about that. There was a very high chance that the black magician that released the ogre chimera is also the owner of the dungeon that would be discovered half a year later.

“Perhaps the black magician was nearby. As for you... I thought you were quite lucky. If you met him, then it would have been hard for you to return.”

“Is it that much?”

“This guy is capable of subduing an ogre and create it into a chimera, and even control it on top of that. This black magician should be at a very high level. But why are you curious about that now?”

“It’s just a personal curiosity. It was the first time I saw a chimera.”

Sungmin replied that and put the mercenary tile inside his chest pocket.

“Then. I’ll see you again.”

“Oh... wait.”

Bern grabbed Sungmin who was about to leave. He made an awkward expression and spoke.

“There’s a person who wishes to meet you.”

“Who is it?”

“Xeon. Do you know him?”

Asked Bern. Hearing that

Sungmin’s expression stiffened. He tried his best to relax his expression and shook his head.

“...I do not.”

“I thought so. You just became a mercenary after all. Xeon... is an SS-rank mercenary. He’s the highest-ranked mercenary among the ones registered in Behengerr branch.”

He did know.

Lee Sungmin knew of Xeon. An SS-rank mercenary. Shaolin’s inner disciple as well as an expert in the fist. The leader of Corona mercenaries.

How could he not know? The mercenary group that Sungmin belonged to in his previous life was none other than Corona. In other words, Xeon was the leader of the group that Sungmin belonged to. However, it wasn’t like there was any connection between Sungmin and Xeon. For Xeon to care... Sungmin was a puny existence.

Corona mercenary group was a large-scale mercenary group. There were over 100 mercenaries that belonged to it, and they had 5 S-rank mercenaries on top of their leader Xeon being an Ss-rank.

There were dozens of C-rank mercenaries in Corona. Sungmin, who was a no-class, and had no special traits of his own, was some random trash that the higher people in the guild did not care about at all. Although Sungmin joined while he was E-rank and endured all the way to when he became a C-rank, he was still a random nobody that any guild had several of.

“It wouldn’t be bad for you to meet him at least once. With your skills, there should be many groups that would want you. Corona mercenary group, lead by Xeon, is considered the best mercenary groups among the ones in Behengerr. Of course, you probably don’t plan on staying Behengerr forever, but Xeon and Corona are names that are well known even in neighboring cities.”

“...Did he wish to meet me immediately?”

“He’s already waiting inside.”

Bern smiled bitterly.

“I know that it’s sudden. But...”

“Okay.”

Sungmin slowly nodded his head.

“I’ll meet him once.”

The choice was his anyway. If he declined, Bern’s position would become awkward. To repay Bern who gave him various benefits, it would be better to meet Xeon at least once.

It was all an excuse anyway.

Sungmin just wanted to meet Xeon once.

The room was filled with smoke from a cigar. The guest room that Bern used had become a personal room for Xeon for now. Bern entered through the door and frowned at Xeon.

“At least open the window.”

Xeon, who was puffing a cigar, only shrugged. Sungmin started at Xeon who slowly put down the cigar.

This was the first time he met with Xeon one to one. Although he did belong to Corona, there were no contact points between him and Xeon. Even when he applied to Corona, and later belonged to it, he never saw Xeon in person. To Corona, the person called Sungmin was no more than a chores-person that ran errands and did cleaning.

“Quite decent.”

Muttered Xeon as he looked at Sungmin’s face. Xeon had wide shoulders and short hair. Sungmin had always seen him from afar. To him, the mercenary known as Xeon was a target of admiration.

Xeon is a former no-class.

It was 15 years ago that Xeon was summoned to Eria. He was summoned as a no-class and was opportune enough to learn the Hundred Steps Divine Fist of the Shaolin, and was acknowledged of his martial art when he went to Shaolin’s mountain in Eria. Although the details weren’t told, Sungmin admired and respected Xeon just because he was a former no-class. He always thought that he would become like Xeon one day.

“...My name is Lee Sungmin.”

“Xeon.”

Xeon put the cigar back in his mouth.

His target of admiration from a long time ago, was sitting right in front of him.

Chapter 51

Encounter (3)

Sungmin felt a gaze.

Xeon was staring at Sunmin's face silently with his mouth shut. The thick smoke from the cigar in Xeon's mouth hindered Xeon's vision, but Sungmin could feel Xeon's gaze from beyond the smoke.

Xeon felt interest in this boy that was in front of him. Yes, boy. Sungmin was still a boy. Although he looked quite older due to the sufferings and hardships he went through, Sungmin's age was still 18. Not old enough to be called an adult(弱冠 – 20 years old).

“Great, I should say.”

Xeon put down the cigar. Bern looked around the smoke-filled room with a frown and opened the window. However, Xeon didn't care about what Bern did. Although Bern was the head of the Behenger branch mercenary guild, as the leader of the Corona mercenaries, Xeon's position should be higher if not equal to Bern's.

“I heard you were 18, but... you're trained quite well. You've killed an ogre chimera?”
“...Yes.”

Even while listening to Xeon's evaluation, Sungmin didn't know what kind of expression to make. Was he supposed to be happy? Or was he supposed to feel bitter. In his previous life, he never caught his attention even once.

“You're proficient in hiding your aura. Meaning, you're used to hiding your qi. Although your physical development seems slightly immature, your muscles are definitely trained well.”

The reason he was lacking physical development was because he didn't have proper food. Sungmin was also aware of that. Xeon looked at his hand.

“Your hands. They are the hands that swung the spear more than thousands of times.

I like them."

"...Thank you."

"A no-class, huh?"

Xeon picked up the cigar he put on the ash tray. After sucking on the cigar a few times, he put the cigar out on the ash tray.

"Is it suffering, or effort, that you went through?"

"...I consider it to be both."

"Probably."

Xeon giggled.

"I was also a no-class after all. I know how shit this world is to no-classes... I can only praise you for achieving such a level despite that."

Otherworlders, who became famous in Eria as a no-class was extremely rare. Xeon, the leader of the Corona mercenaries, was one of them. The reason Sungmin chose to enter the Corona mercenaries as their bottom run was also because he admired Xeon.

No. Strictly speaking, it wasn't really admiration. What Sungmin of the previous life wished for was salvation and sympathy. Sungmin... wished Xeon to save him. Because they were both no-classes. He expected Xeon to sympathize with him and give him good things.

Of course, no such thing happened. There were many no-classes in the Corona mercenaries who entered it with the same mindset as him, and Xeon did not give them a single glance.

"Enter the Corona mercenaries."

Spoke Xeon.

"I have already heard of your skills. A solo kill of an ogre chimera. With that kind of achievements, you should become an SS-rank soon. If you enter, I will put you right by my side."

"...You mean you'll let me have the vice-leader position?"

"I don't think it's a bad offer."

"Is it because I'm a no-class?"

"No, I'm just greedy of your skills. You seemed to have stepped in to the realm of peak-level experts at that age. With enough time and support, you may surpass the wall of the peak-level once and for all."

"And you mean you can provide me with that time and support?"

Xeon's mouth turned into a grin at that question. He put his hand inside his chest pocket and took out a small wooden chest. Sungmin thought that it was an interspatial pocket, but it was not. The chest held a small pill inside. A very clear fragrance started circulating around the room which was full of stuffy smoke.

"This is..."

Bern who was watching from the side, spoke in surprise. Sungmin's expression also stiffened.

"Lesser restoration pill."

Xeon crossed his arms.

"It's one of the secret pills of the Shaolin. Although not as much as the greater restoration pill, its effects overpower any ordinary spiritual medicine."

"...You will give me that?"

"Instead."

Tap. Xeon closed the wooden chest.

"You will tell me about the arts you've learned."

"Just the names?"

"No, their scriptures as well."

Sungmin made an expression of absurdity. No matter how precious the lesser restoration pill was, it was hard to compare it with the Shadowless Spirit, Nine Skies Infinity Spear, and the Purple Cloud Divine Art.

"I decl..."

"I'll give you a greater restoration pill."

Xeon spoke before Sungmin could finish his words.

"If you tell me the scriptures of your spear technique, I will give you the greater restoration pill."

"...I don't understand. Why do you wish to know?"

Xeon was an expert in the Hundred Steps Divine Fist. As an inner disciple of Shaolin, he learned the secret arts of the Shaolin, which was considered as the best sect out of the Ten Great Sects. Why would Xeon need to know a spear art that he didn't even use – Sungmin did not understand.

"Because I cannot trust you."

Replied Xeon.

"I do not plan to learn the art you tell me. However, I'm going to keep it in mind. Only then would I be able to prepare for your betrayal."

"You think I will betray you?"

"Not just you."

Xeon put the wooden chest back inside his pocket and spoke.

"I do not trust people. Just because I give trust to someone doesn't mean that that someone will trust me as well. Humans are such creatures. You... are a talent I desire to get, but at the same time, someone too big to hold. That is why you will tell me the scriptures of your arts."

Even so, telling him to teach him the scriptures of his own arts was a shameless thing to do, was it not? When Sungmin's expression turned worse, Xeon added.

"Like I said, I do not plan to learn your spear techniques. I will just keep it in mind. If you tell me the scriptures and enter the Corona mercenaries, I shall give you both the lesser and greater restoration pills. What do you think?"

It was shameless of Xeon to ask him to tell him the scriptures of the arts, but the things Xeon was willing to pay in return were very tempting. If Sungmin could consume the lesser and greater restoration pills, Sungmin will grow immensely.

"I decline."

However, this was Sungmin's answer. Xeon frowned at his answer.

“Is what I’m offering you insufficient?”

“No, they are not. The greater and lesser restoration pills... I believe that those two are worth more than a peerless divine art.”

“Then why?”

“Just the same reason as you. I also cannot trust you.”

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust in people. He didn’t trust in Xeon. Hearing Sungmin’s answer, Xeon shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“That’s a pity.”

Saying that, Xeon stood up.

“If you change your mind then come to me at any time. My conditions will not change.”

Sungmin did not reply to those words. When Xeon left, Bern, who was silent all this time, spoke up.

“It seems like Xeon is very wary of you.”

Although it was a pity that he couldn’t get the lesser and greater restoration pills, this couldn’t be helped. The risks of telling another his own arts were too big.

“Oh, yes. I’ll tell you something that you might take interest in. The ogre chimera that you killed. We decided to investigate them with the magician’s guild in Behengerr since it is hard for me to do it alone.”

“Is that so?”

“Would you like to see it before you go?”

“What would I know?”

“You were the one to fight it. The other side also said that they wanted to listen to your opinion.”

When Bern said that, it became harder to refuse. Since it wasn’t like he had anything urgent right now, Sungmin nodded his head.

The magician’s guild of Behengerr was not that far from the mercenary guild. Thinking about it, this was Sungmin’s first visit to the magician’s guild. In his previous life, he had nothing to do with magic at all. Although he was able to learn a few spells thanks to Scarlett in this life, that didn’t mean that he was proficient in it.

“Are you interested in magic?”

“Interest... yes.”

“Magic is a splendid field of study. If someone asks what miracles are, I will immediately reply that miracles equal magic.”

Bern’s expression as he said that showed pride for his magic. Sungmin, who was looking around the magician’s guild with interest, suddenly spotted a sphere levitating in the air.

“What is that?”

“A magic stone. Do you know what it is?”

“I know it as the stone that stores mana.”

“You’re right. Magic stones are stones that can store mana. All artifacts use magic stones, including interspatial pockets.”

Bern, as though he had just found the opportunity to do so, started explaining the mechanisms behind interspatial pockets. Inserting magic stones into the existing bags or boxes, and hiding them through spatial distortion magic, and then inserting mana after casting spatial expansion magic, etc, etc. Sungmin half-ignored the grandiose explanations

“This way.”

Bern lead Sungmin the way while chatting the whole time. The place Bern took Sungmin to was the basement of the building. Walking down to the end of the long corridor, Bern stopped in front of a red door.

“The ogre chimera research is done here.”

When Bern knocked on the door, the door soon opened. Sungmin gasped after breathing in the disgusting air that was inside the room.

“Hm.”

Bern also didn’t seem to imagine that such a scene would be waiting for him. The room... was horrific. Butchered ogre body parts were levitating in the air, and the internal guts were strewn around everywhere.

“You’re here?”

A man clad in a white gown approached Bern and Sungmin.

“...What is this?”

“Investigation, of course.”

Said the man while shrugging. Unlike the wrinkle-less young face, his hair had lots of white strands. Making a nonchalant face, the man looked at Sungmin.

“...Oho.”

The man's eyes sparkled.

“This is an incredibly... rare... hmm.”

The man approached Sungmin while saying that and stopped.

“Oh, I'm late to introduce myself. I'm called Kim Jonghyun.”

The man nodded stooped down a little.

“Who are you?”

His curiosity-filled eyes headed towards Sungmin. Sungmin was quite surprised at the name ‘Kim Jonghyun’. Not because he knew who he was, but because the name style was the same as his own.

“...I'm Lee Sungmin.”

“A Korean?”

Kim Jonghyun also laughed and asked back at Sungmin's answer. When Sungmin nodded his head, Kim Jonghyun laughed again.

“Well, just because we're both Korean doesn't mean that we're from the same dimension. We are very probably originating from different Koreas of different dimensions.”

Eria was like that. It summoned people of other worlds at random from all sorts of dimensions. Even the martial cultivation world had different varieties, and Korea, the

place Sungmin was born and raised in, was the same.

"The Korea... no, Earth I was born in became a hot mess due to the appearance of monsters. Monsters popped out from everywhere, and hunters and magicians were born after awakening processes. What was your Earth like?"

"...There were no monsters."

"Then it's a different dimension. Well, in any case, it's still nice to meet another Korean."

Kim Jonghyun extended his hand and offered Sungmin a handshake.

"...Though, that's not the only reason I'm delighted."

Kim Jonghyun made a mysterious smile.

Chapter 52

Encounter (4)

“What do you mean by that?”

Lee Sungmin tilted his head and asked, but Kim Jonghyun only made a suspicious smile and did not reply. Instead, he asked while taking a glance at Bern.

“But, why are you here?”

“Didn’t you say so?”

Bern laughed.

“That you wanted to meet the mercenary that exterminated the ogre chimera in person.”

“Ah. Ooooh... so that’s it.”

Kim Jonghyun nodded his head. He grinned before looking at Lee Sungmin.

“So you are the mercenary that exterminated the ogre chimera?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t think so because you were younger than I thought.”

Kim Jonghyun waved his hand as he said that. When he pushed against the empty air, the levitating ogre chimera’s head flew towards him. Lee Sungmin frowned and took a few steps back. The ogre had been beheaded. The two eyes were dug out, and the thread that sewed the mouth had been taken out and its mouth was wide open.

“Very interesting.”

Kim Jonghyun hummed. He extended his two hands to grab the head.

“This chimera has a variety of high-level magic cast on it. Though, I can’t completely know what they are since it’s dead. However, what’s for sure is that the mage that created this chimera is enough to be called an archmage at least.”

"That's difficult for me to accept."

Bern frowned at Kim Jonghyun's words and refuted him.

"Archmage isn't a word that can easily be said."

"You can't say that. Even though it's a different field, you must acknowledge that person's abilities, no?"

"Ugh..."

Bern groaned. Grabbing tightly onto his sleeves, Bern sighed before turning around.

"There's no reason for me to listen to it together. I'll be going back to the guild then."

Saying that, Bern left the room. Sungmin, who was left alone with Kim Jonghyun, tried to call Bern back in panic, but the doors had already shut. Behind him, Kim Jonghyun giggled.

"Isn't jealousy such an embarrassing thing?"

"Jealousy?"

"Sir Bern hasn't had any progress for a long time. So what I'm saying is... it's like martial arts. To reach a higher level, one must first climb up the wall. And for a very long time now, sir Bern hasn't been able to do that."

Muttering those words, Kim Jonghyun pushed the ogre's head towards Lee Sungmin. It was as though he was throwing a basketball. Sungming dodged the ogre's head with panic when he saw that it was flying towards him.

"He may be able to reach the realm of archmages once he climbs over that wall, but he hasn't been able to. How stuffy must he feel about himself?"

Saying that, Kim Jonghyun waved his hand again. The corpse and guts of the ogre, all levitating in the air, started floating towards him.

"Well, let's leave that aside. I said a while ago, but this corpse is very interesting. If it were up to me, I want to start explain to you every little detail about how this monster had a variety of magic cast onto it and how many types of monsters were used in the creation of this monstrosity using the ogre as the base... but it should be hard for you to understand since you are not a mage."

"Let's get to the point."

“How was it?”

Lee Jonghyun shrugged his shoulders and asked.

“I heard from sir Ludd, who went with you to the extermination of the ogre. However, I wanted to listen to you, who has actually fought the thing itself. What... did you feel as you fought it?”

(T/N: *Ludd* may have been translated to something else before... *Roode Lude. Rude... Idunno*)

“...I don’t get what you’re asking.”

“Didn’t you feel something strange as you fought it?”

Asked Kim Jonghyun, receiving that question, Lee Sungmin thought back to the fight with the ogre. Something strange... he didn’t feel at all. In the first place, this was the first time Lee Sungmin fought an ogre, so it was impossible for him to compare it with other gores.

“None.”

“What of its durability? Regenerative capabilities?”

“It didn’t even get scratched when I attacked with full power. All I could do was to attack its weak points, like its joins. I pierced its eye, but it regenerated back in less than one minute.”

“Was there anything else special about it?”

“Nimble... I think it was. Also, the attacks were heavy. I would have become a pulp if I got hit on that straight on.”

Lee Sungmin explained the things he felt while fighting with the ogre. Listening to that quietly, Kim Jonghyun nodded his head.

“Okay then.”

“Does this help you at all?”

“It’s better than not listening to it.”

Kim Jonghyun giggled and grabbed the ogre’s guts.

“It was a helpful story. Although people say that the corpse contains a lot of information, that isn’t usually the case with chimeras. The moment the chimera dies, the magic cast on it is dispelled.”

The tangled large intestines opened. Lee Sungmin took a few steps back with a frown.

"Ogres are classified as top predators. However, that doesn't mean that they are capable of receiving a full power attack from a peak-level expert frontally. Although they do have regenerative capabilities, that doesn't mean they can regenerate an eye in one minute. This helped out a lot."

Lee Sungmin looked at Kim Jonghyun that said that. After a while, he opened his mouth again.

"What were you trying to say last time?"

"Oh, oooh? Oh... it's nothing."

Kim Jonghyun made a mysterious smile.

"You. You are twisted."

"...What?"

"The laws of cause and effect is twisted around you. Are you aware of that?"

Lee Sungmin's expression stiffened after hearing that. A being with twisted cause and effect. The ones that noticed this about him were only Msh and the mediators of Erebris.

"...How did you know?"

"So you did know. Wow, this is amazing. If I was in your state, I would have despaired and gone crazy."

Kim Jonghyun giggled. He took a few steps back and waved his hands. Two chairs flew from the corner and landed near the two of them.

"Would you like to drink something? There's coffee, red tea, and even green tea."

"No... it's fine."

He didn't feel like drinking. "Despaired and gone crazy". These words nagged his mind. Kim Jonghyun made a dry laugh seeing that Lee Sungmin was frighteningly staring at him.

"Who told you?"

Asked Kim Jonghyun while crossing his legs. Although he did offer, he didn't drink anything either.

"...Msh."

"Aha. The god in the mountain of trial and suffering. So you trained in Msh's mountain?"

"...Yes."

"Okay. How many years?"

"Is that important?"

"No, it was a personal curiosity of mine. You don't have to answer. Yes. So... did Msh tell you? That the cause and effect has been twisted?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand about him?"

Being asked that by Kim Jonghyun, Sungmin took a deep breath and replied.

"He told me that I would suffer for eternity after my death."

"Such an unkind explanation."

Kim Jonghyun giggled again.

"Can you tell me why the cause and effect have been twisted?"

"And if I talk about it?"

"I will be able to reply to what you are curious about."

"I cannot trust you."

"I can swear. I shall absolutely not talk about what I've heard from you to anyone else. This is an oath of a mage to the great mana, and cannot be reversed. If I do, I'll die."

Kim Jonghyun spoke as though it was nothing. As he said that, blue mana swirled around his body. An oath to mana. Lee Sungmin knew about this as well. Mages that walk on the path of magic cannot go against that oath. Lee Sungmin stared at Kim Jonghyun for a while before speaking.

"...I have died once. I have died, and I have returned."

"Do you mean you went back in time?"

"Yes."

"So that's why the cause and effect have been twisted. Well, of course. Birth, living, and death. This is the first rule that makes up the world as well as being the most

fundamental cause and effect. All existences are bound by this cause and effect.”

Tap. Kim Jonghyun tapped on the armrest of his chair.

“This doesn’t only apply to life forms. It’s like that for the chair below me as well. A carpenter creates a chair. It is used as a chair, and it is broken. That, is also cause and effect.”

Kim Jonghyun’s lips curved into a smile.

“What do you think needs to be done for a broken chair to return to its normal state?”

“...Fix it.”

“Correct. However, will that fixed chair really be the same chair? Repairing the broken part, hammering new nails – in this process, the chair would become a completely different chair altogether. Even a chair is like this. Then what of life? A dead human returning to the past... is the act against the most fundamental law of the world. Acting against cause and effect causes it to be twisted. This becomes karma that the soul gathers.”

Lee Sungmin listened to Kim Jonghyun’s words silently. His voice now sounded excited.

“All karma are accounted after death. What Msh said is the truth, but he didn’t explain enough. It won’t end with just suffering. Oh, not that I know what kind of suffering you will go through.”

“That’s nothing different from what Msh said.”

“It’s not like I’ve died. Mortals can absolutely not know about the afterlife. Well... the study of magic is the pursuit of truth at the extremes of nonsense, so if a mage glimpses at the truth, they might be able to come to a realization about the afterlife and other things that are not allowed for mortals... but if they do, then they must be a sage that has transcended the archmagic realm.”

However, Kim Jonghyun laughed. He glanced at Lee Sungmin’s face before continuing.

“If all you’ve heard from Msh is that your cause and effect has been twisted, I have other things to tell you.”

“...And what would that be?”

“You are strange.”

Kim Jonghyun's eyes narrowed.

"Not only are your cause and effect twisted, but also..."

Also...

Also.

Also, also, also.

Kim Jonghyun's last word strangely lengthened out and echoed. Lee Sungmin raised his hand to block his left ear. When he panicked, Kim Jonghyun's mouth became shut. Blinking several times, Kim Jonghyun shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't."

"What?"

"I cannot say."

Kim Jonghyun made a bitter smile while saying that. Lee Sungmin became absent minded at those words.

"What do you mean by that?"

"If I say it, I will die."

Saying that, Kim Jonghyun stood up.

"Please understand."

"W, wait. What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say this or not."

Muttered he.

"Your life may not be yours anymore."

Those words were mysterious in meaning. Naturally, Lee Sungmin didn't understand any of it. When he was about to ask again, Kim Jonghyun raised his hand to stop him.

"Will you find me again next time?"

It was a polite request.

“I also am very confused, and need time to organize my thoughts.”

“...I cannot understand.”

“Me neither”

Kim Jonghyun made a bitter smile.

“However, this is the absolute truth. If I do say it, I will die. I do not want to die. At least right now.”

Saying that, Kim Jonghyun took a deep breath.

“Please find me again next time.”

Chapter 53

Encounter (5)

He did not understand what was happening. Having exited Kim Jonghyun's room, Sungmin stood there blankly while scratching his ears. The moment Kim Jonghyun was about to say something... *something* had happened. He did not know what had happened, but the sense of unfamiliarity he felt back then was definitely real.

'Just what was that?'

Sungmin pressed on his ears while feeling very messy inside. He heard that Kim Jonghyun would die if he spoke about it. What kind of nonsense was that? In that room, Kim Jonghyun and Sungmin were the only ones there. There was no way Sungmin would try to kill him, then who else would kill him?

'Wait.'

Think. What happened back in the Mount of Msh. The words that Msh said to be talking to 'himself'. At the end of those words, he warned someone other than Sungmin.

'Stop. This is my domain. If you do not want to die a mutual death, then you should stop your actions.'

(T/N: May have been translated differently before)

At that time, he did not listen to those words very well. At that time... who was Msh warning? He felt a chill, and scraped the back of his neck. The chill he felt back then, was engraved very deeply into him.

"Hm?"

Just as Sungmin was organizing his thoughts without leaving the door of Kim Jonghyun's room, someone approached him with big steps. Reacting to the presence, Sungmin looked behind him.

“You...”

The woman with her eyes wide open spoke up. Sungmin tilted his head while looking at the face of the woman who looked at him. Looking at Sungmin’s face for a while, the woman frowned.

“Aren’t you that idiot from back then?”

“...Eh?”

Sungmin widened his eyes at those sudden words. You are – spoke she. The woman spoke again while staring at him.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“...Who might you be?”

“Wow, you’re so...”

At Sungmin’s question, the woman pounded on her chest as though feeling stuffy. The red eyes and the red hair. Something flashed by Sungmin’s mind the next moment. He spoke.

“Miss Scarlett?”

“You finally recognize me?”

(T/N: I’ll add two t’s at the end to differentiate from the color)

At Sungmin’s question, Scarlett shouted in anger. Sungmin was surprised by the sudden loud voice and took a couple steps back.

Scarlett Lecir. The woman he met back in Mount Msh when he was training. She had been training for a year longer than Sungmin, and had left the mountain after ending her training along with the Sword Demon Dok Bijoon.

“Why is Miss Scarlett here?”

“That’s what I want to ask.”

The reason why he didn’t remember her was quite simple. Although there was the three year gap, it had more to do with Lee Sungmin’s memories of her, wearing tattered rags and dirty as she had not washed for a very long time.

But what of her now? She had clean clothes on, and her hair as well as her face was very clean. Seeing that, Sungmin realized that Scarlett was a remarkable beauty.

“This is the mage guild. Didn’t you learn martial arts? Why, did you change your lane and want to become a mage now?”

“No, that’s not what I...”

“Then what? You want to learn both martial arts and magic? Ayy, don’t do something so stupid and focus on what you are doing right...”

“Didn’t I say I’m not? I did not come here to learn magic.”

Sungmin sighed and interrupted her words. Seeing his attitude, Scarlett pouted.

“Then why are you here?”

“Because of business.”

“Business?”

Scarlett raised her gaze and looked at the red door behind Sungmin. After looking at that door, she frowned.

“Does your business, perhaps, have anything to do with that lunatic Kim Jonghyun?”

“Do you know him?”

“Then would I not? He’s a damn lunatic.”

Scarlett grumbled and scratched the back of her head. In the mountain, white dandruff always fell off her hair whenever she scratched her hair, but there was no ‘snow’ this time. It seemed as though scratching the back of her head was a habit of hers.

“It’s nice to see you after such a long time. I want to have a talk with you, and I’m quite free now too. How about it? Wanna come over to my room?”

“Your room?”

“Hey, hey, you horny kid. Don’t think strange things. I’m just bored, so I just want someone to talk to.”

“I don’t remember doing anything for you to call me horny.”

“How old are you again?”

“...18.”

“Boys at that age are always horny. All they can think of is lewd things.”

“What the hell is that...”

Sungmin grumbled, but Scarlett didn't seem to have any intentions on retracting her statement. Scarlett lead Sungmin to her room. Unlike Kim Jonghyun's room which were filled with levitating ogre limbs and guts, her room didn't have any of those grotesque things. However, it was quite dirty.

"Sit wherever you fancy."

Saying that, she also sat down on a pile of books. Sungmin looked around the room and muttered.

"So you are the dirty kind, Miss Scarlet."

"Hey, can you not be so rude? Most mages live like this anyway. And how am I dirty? Do you know how many times I shower every day after I left that damned mountain?"

Grumbled Scarlett and crossed her legs.

"So? Why are you here?"

At that question, Sungmin explained to her the circumstances behind his visit. This was nothing to hide anyway. When his story ended, Scarlett muttered while frowning.

"Kim Jonghyun. I've known that that damn kid was playing around with chimera. Though, never did I imagine it to be you who caught it."

"...What kind of person is he?"

Thinking back, Sungmin didn't know what kind of person Kim Jonghyun actually was. All he knew that he was from Earth – a different one from his – and from Korea. Hearing his question, Scarlett shrugged her shoulders.

"He's a lunatic. He's a little, no , a lot out of his mind. But, his skills are the real deal. I'm not sure about other things, but there is no one that tops him in terms of knowledge regarding black magic and chimera, at least here in the mage guild of Behengerr"

Sungmin had to agree that Kim Jonghyun was a 'lunatic'. Making body parts of the chimera ogre float in his lab was definitely something very far from an ordinary person.

"Why are you here then, Miss Scarlett?"

“Because I’m a mage.”

Scarlett replied nonchalantly.

“It’s not so strange for a mage to belong to the mage guild, is it? The mage guild is quite comfortable. As long as you have the skills and bring out research results, then they support you with a lot of funds. That’s why I’m here – this is the closest one from Msh’s mountain.”

Scarlett Lecir. Sungmin had only heard about her name through rumors in his previous life. He did not know that she was in Behengerr.

‘No, wait. This is before she became an archmage.’

Looking at the series of events, She would compile her foundation here in Behengerr and later leave to become an archmage.

“The body is comfortable, but the mind isn’t. My research isn’t showing much progress nowadays.”

Grumbled Scarlett. Sungmin could only laugh at those words. Even though she may not have any progress right now, the fact that she would later found a new faction and become an archmage was a guaranteed future. Unlike Sungmin, Scarlett would later become an archmage.

“It’ll go well.”

“You don’t even know how it goes. Rather than that, Baek Sogo... you didn’t leave with her?”

“Yes. senior has left the mountain a year before me.”

“She’s quite vicious, you know that? She was there for almost three years! You too. I left because I felt like I’ll go insane if I stayed there for a few more days.”

“You have parted ways with sir Dok Bijoon?”

“I left that guy as soon as we arrived at Behengerr. He asked me if I wanted to come with him for travelling, so I told him to go alone.”

Saying that, Scarlett laughed again.

“But well. It’s nice to see someone I know after all this time. Recently, I haven’t been talking to people thank to research. Not like anyone would talk to me with my

personality."

Again.

"Come find me again next time when you have the time. I'll give you tea at least."

Again.

Leaving the Mage guild, Sungmin felt very complex inside. To treat her words like it was due to friendship, Nevel's words tugged on his mind. That yet again jumbled up with what Kim Jonghyun said to him.

'Just what is this?'

Your life may not be yours anymore – these words that he did not know the meaning of kept echoing in his mind. What kind of bullshit was this? This was none other than his own life. If it was not his, then whose is it?

He visited the mercenary guild to report to Bern about what he spoke about with Kim Jonghyun before coming back to his house. He was planning to practice the spear again, but he couldn't focus due to his complex mind. Eventually, he put down the spear and sat down in a meditative position.

He circulated the purple cloud divine art to shake off the complex feeling, but it didn't work so well. The words that Kim Jonghyun said, the words that Msh said. Those mysterious words kept alternating in his head. He was told that there was a reason for him coming back in time. He was told that there was no such thing as coincidences. His strangely good luck. If it was not a coincidence, then what of that? What of his meeting with others? This life – the life that belonged to the entity capable of thought and reason, named Lee Sungmin – whose was it?

When he barely shook off those thoughts, it was already evening. Having woken up, Sungmin sighed and pressed on his forehead.

"...I don't need it."

Muttering that, he dragged his steps out of the house. He stood in the garden full of weed and picked up the spear that he had thrown before.

He did not want to care. Thinking about such things and being suspicious about it will not lead him to an answer, and no one would tell him the answer either. In the end, this was all meaningless doubt and worry. He decided to give up thinking about it.

He ignored it.

Martial arts was different. Martial arts was; the spear was; showing him a clear answer unlike those vague questions. He felt very comfortable inside. He swung the spear for quite a long time. The three basic moves, The Nine Skies Infinity Spear. No one told him the answer for this either, but Sungmin intuitively knew that he spear was close to the answer.

However, it was not a complete answer. What Sungmin pursued was that. He wished to save Baek Sogo, surpass Wiji Hoyeon, etc. He had an objective he had to fulfill before he could do that.

When he put down the spear, it was already morning. Drenched in sweat, Sungmin felt refreshed rather than tired. Realizing that he still hadn't had any meals, Sungmin made a bitter smile.

"No wonder I don't grow."

Grumbling, Sungmin entered back to his house.

Chapter 54

Variable (1)

Sungmin listed the things he had to do.

His first priority was to participate in the black mage dungeon expedition that would happen half a year later. His objective there was to acquire the magic armor, and if possible, other artifacts as well.

After that, there was nothing urgent. There was no need for him to remain in the city of Behengerr either so he was planning to leave at that time.

The most important thing he had to do then, was to prevent Baek Sogo's death that would occur in 6 years.

If so, then all he had to do was to conquer the dungeon before they did. If the dungeon's value disappeared, neither Baek Sogo nor Wiji Hoyeon will head there either.

However, that was impossible. Real 'dungeons' and not artificial ones were like natural disasters. They were created randomly. Dungeons made like that were sometimes not discovered immediately and were discovered after a lot of time had passed, but this didn't apply to the dungeon 6 years later. That dungeon would be made 6 years later, and would practically immediately be discovered by the nearby adventurers. They decided to sell the information about that dungeon rather than go explore it, and that was how the rumors about the dungeon was made.

In other words, even if Sungmin headed to that dungeon right now, it would be impossible for him to conquer it anyway. Moreover, it wasn't like he knew the exact location of that dungeon either. He knew its vague whereabouts, but just searching for it in that wide area would take a lot of time as well.

'Perhaps I'll meet Wiji Hoyeon again.'

The promised date was 10 years later. However, he might meet with her in the process of preventing Baek Sogo's death. Am I supposed to be happy? – is a question he asked

himself several times before, but he only felt bitter about it.

Why did Wiji Hoyeon kill Baek Sogo?

It wasn't just Baek Sogo either. All the people that entered the dungeon with her were killed by Wiji Hoyeon. Just why? – he presumed that there must be reasons. At least according to what he knew of her.

'The her I know of.'

The image he had of her started becoming messy. It was like a noise interference in radio waves. The sound of the cicadas he heard from Mount Msh, that annoying noise echoed in his ears. Sungmin blocked his ears. Nevel's words, Kim Jonghyun's words. Everything made his mind chaotic.

The Wiji Hoyeon that Sungmin knew of. The Baek Sogo that Sungmin knew of. The people that Sungmin had met and got to know each other. The people that showed him good will.

There was once a time when he was suspicious of their good intentions. However, he accepted them. Their actions had reasons behind them... or did they? Did their actions really have a reason behind them? There are no such thing as coincidences. The words Msh spoke of. Life. Sungmin's life. Just whose is it?

"Ah."

His mind became chaotic. Sungmin collapsed on the spot. Why was he brought to the past? It should have been a simple coincidence. The fact that he entered that dungeon was a coincidence, and the fact that he grabbed the stone of reincarnation was also a coincidence. Yes, that was all. Msh said that there are no such thing as coincidences in this world... but Sungmin couldn't acknowledge that.

If it was not a coincidence, then what else was it?

'God of time.'

Denir. The God of time residing in Drimoor. Msh told him to go look for Denir – along with the words that it was up to him as to what he would acquire from his meeting with Denir.

Can Denir answer his question? Kim Jonghyun could not. He seemed to know something, but told him that he could not tell him the details. A forced and offensive *something* was deeply linked to the question that Sungmin had of himself. Even Msh did not answer. It was as though he could not answer.

A human could not answer, and a God could not answer. Can Denir really answer that question?

His heart was already heading off to Drimoor, but he couldn't depart immediately. Drimoor was located very far away. From Behengerr, it would take at least over a month to get there by horse. He didn't even know what would come from his meeting with Denir, so he couldn't just set off for Drimoor.

So, he was planning to focus on getting that magic armor for now.

"Long time no see."

Nevel answered his call and appeared. He took a bow. Sungmin had not called for him for a week now. Rather than taking a quest that he could get from Erebris, he thought that it was better to shake off the temptation in his heart.

"I wish to check the quests."

"I have already organized them for you."

Nevel raised his hand at Sungmin's words. After he tapped on empty air a few times, a semi-translucent window appeared in front of him. Was that magic as well? – thought Sungmin as he looked at the window that Nevel was looking at.

"There are various types in S-rank missions. Do you have any types that you prefer?"
"Something I can do alone, and something that doesn't take a lot of time. And if possible, I'd like a mission that I can take not too far from here."

"Something you can do alone and not taking a long time – most of those are subjugation missions though."

"I do not mind."

"Hm... There aren't many subjugation missions around Behengerr. As you know, most of the missions around here are taken by the Corona mercenaries."

Nevel scratched his head and answered.

“The mission that we connect you with are mostly shared with the mercenary guild. Of course, not all of them are like that. Top-secret missions that were asked through us are not open to the guild. However, those types of missions cannot be taken at S-rank.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. I can make it work out if you really want to... but with your skills, Sir Lee Sungmin, you will very probably die.”

Sungmin did not deny Nevel’s evaluation. Although he had skills of an SS-rank capable of slaying an ogre chimera by himself, top-secret missions are just as dangerous as they were secretive. Sungmin didn’t plan to do a dangerous mission.

“Let’s see... there is one mission that fits your criteria.”

Reading down the list, Nevel selected one of the missions and showed it to Sungmin. Although it was pretty far off from Behengerr, it was a village that would take 2 days by horse.

“It’s not a mission chosen by the Corona mercenaries. Twin-headed trolls. Do you know of them?”

“I don’t.”

Replied Sungmin. Trolls were similar to ogres, but were considered below them in various ways. They lacked intelligence and muscular power compared to ogres.

However, there were aspects in which trolls were overwhelmingly superior to ogres in – their tremendous regenerative powers, as well as their resistance to magic. The reason why trolls were classified as A-rank monsters were due to these reasons. If it was a twin-headed one, then it would be a monster befitting of an S-rank.

“Would you like to take it? The reward is 30 million erre.”

“I’ll take it.”

Sungmin nodded his head.

†

“So you killed a twin-headed troll this time?”

When he returned to Behengerr mercenary guild, Ludd asked. This was the first time he met Ludd after the ogre chimera subjugation. Sungmin looked at Ludd staring at him and nodded his head.

“Yes.”

“I heard you didn’t receive it through the guild... Do you have some other places you can take missions from or something?”

“...I don’t think I can answer that.”

Sungmin replied with a bitter smile. Ludd shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, you don’t *have* to take missions from the guild. If you are so skilled, you can go around taking missions directly too. Rather than that... I heard about it. Apparently you rejected Xeon’s offer?”

Sungmin didn’t speak about it, nor did it seem like Bern spoke about it either. Then did Xeon say it? Sungmin nodded his head while sitting down next to Ludd.

“Where did you hear that from?”

“Xeon said it. That he tried to scout you, but failed. Thanks to that, a lot of the other mercenaries have their eyes on you.”

Saying that, Ludd giggled.

“No, I guess it isn’t exactly like that. Most people had their eyes on you from the moment you showed off your sword-qi the first time you arrived. Especially so, since you are a no-class.”

Sungmin did not react to that. He knew that he was receiving attention. The ones that looked at him the most were the no-classes. Most of them had very low ranks, and were admiring and jealous of the peak-level no-class Sungmin. Sungmin was very familiar with these kind of gazes. After all, he felt the same towards Xeon when he entered Corona mercenaries in his previous life.

“Distance yourself from Xeon.”

Ludd's voice lowered. Bern couldn't be seen over the bar table today.

"Xeon is... well... a very vicious guy at heart. He's very doubtful, and doesn't trust his allies. All A-rank mercenaries and above in his group are controlled by him."

"...I am aware of that. I don't trust Xeon. That's also the reason I rejected him."

"Thanks to that, he should be feeling very uncomfortable right now."

Muttering those words, Ludd drank the beer in his glass in one shot.

"It's better to not fight with Xeon. Just... it's easier to stay low in front of him."

"Why are you saying these to me?"

Listening to Ludd's words, Sungmin suddenly asked while looking at him. Ludd blinked his eyes several times.

"You think I'm being nosy?"

"No, it's not that. I'm thankful that you're worried about me... but are you telling me that you can be trusted?"

"That's up to you to decide."

Spoke Ludd nonchalantly.

"But I can swear this. I don't exactly hate you."

"Then?"

"What do you mean then? You want me to love you or something? I'm sorry but I don't swing that way."

Ludd grumbled as he swung he tilted his glass.

"I hate Xeon. A few years ago... that is, when I was still an A-rank, I was scouted by Xeon, but he told me to tell him what was practically my lifeline, so I denied him. After that, I had to go through quite the suffering."

"Your lifeline?"

"I am an elementalist."

Replied Ludd. This was something that Sungmin knew as well. Ludd used the sword, but did not use martial arts to do it. Instead, Ludd used elemental arts. Elementalists were very rare even in Eria.

"Xeon told me, that I should tell him the oath I took in the elemental contract. Do you know what a taboo is?"

"...No, I don't."

"Elemental arts, is uh... is the contract with an elemental of another world. In that contract, the elementalist must swear an oath about something to the elemental. It's not something great, but if the elementalist goes against that oath, then his or her contract with the elemental would end then and there."

Saying that, Ludd frowned.

"That son of a bitch. He asked an elementalist that? So I said never. After that... I had to go through quite some suffering. As you know, the majority of the missions coming to the Behengerr mercenary guild is taken by the Corona mercenaries. So, there were no missions for me. There are a lot of A-rank mercenaries after all."

"...And so?"

"I left Behengerr and went to another town to become S-rank there. Then I returned – to take revenge against that son of a bitch Xeon. But when I returned... that fucker became an SS-rank already. Shit."

Saying that Ludd giggled.

"Well, you are an S-rank so it should be hard for Xeon to do anything to you. But watch out anyway. That bitch Xeon... can't even trust his own men, but treats everyone else like shit."

Sungmin had never heard that Xeon was such a person in his previous life. After all, he was a puny being to know things like these.

"Got it."

However, it was different this time. Despite that, he still felt slightly bitter.

It was as though he found out about the vicious and dirty sides of someone he admired.

Chapter 55

Variable (2)

As though Ludd's warnings and advices had never happened, Xeon did not directly pressure Sungmin at all. However, Sungmin wasn't still completely calm yet. There was nothing to lose by being wary.

It had been 3 months since Sungmin had become an S-rank in the Behengerr mercenary guild. During this time, Sungmin had carried out three missions through Erebris. As there was a limit to the missions he could take, he couldn't do more of them.

When his financial status became satisfactory, Sungmin paid an additional fee to Selgerus. Although Sungmin had paid 27 million erre as the reward, he paid more to fill 60 million.

And with the remaining money, he bought spiritual medicine from Erebris.

The pill that Sungmin bought was named the Everlasting pill (無窮丹). It was hard to compare to the Lesser and Greater Restoration pills that Xeon had in his possession, but it could be compared to the Holy Spiritual pill he got from winning the Xenavis Colosseum fight. These pills were also dozens of millions of erre in value, so he ended up using all the money he got through those missions.

He had no regrets. Rather than learning additional martial arts, his priority right now was to complete what he had learned. Qi was necessary in that process.

Sungmin felt a bottleneck.

He had plenty of qi in his dantian. Although his qi increased through the Everlasting pill, it was still impossible for him to have a breakthrough sheerly through the quantity of qi. He would require several times the qi he had in order to forcefully break through, and there was no guarantee that he would be able to break through even after eating the Greater Restoration pill.

Bottleneck.

Whether it was circulating the Purple Cloud Divine Art, or carrying out the moves of the Nine Skies Infinity Spear, or when he was moving according to the steps of the Shadowless Phantom, he felt the presence of an obstacle. It was too high to jump over, and too sturdy to break through. Although a clear form of growth was given to him when he was training in mount Msh, He was not able to earn those growth supports now that he had left. The growth support he had right now was only his no-class and the low-rank martial skeleton. Even adding effort on top of that, his martial arts showed barely any signs of increase.

His Shadowless Phantom was still at 5th success, while the Purple Cloud Divine Art and the Nine Skies Infinity Spear were at 6th success. Even though it had been three months since he left the mountain, there was not much progress. Although he became proficient in his own skills, he had not gained anything beyond that.

He needed the magic armor.

Gaining the magic armor may allow him to break through. A mercenary at the level of 3rd rate had reached the realm of peaks purely through the magic armor. As such, Sungmin longed for the magic armor. If he, who was already a peak-level expert, gets his hand on the magic armor, he may reach the realm of exceeds.

Well, that was what he hoped for.

“It took a longer time than I expected.”

Selgerus had become quite tattered after these two months. She was still wearing the dirty apron and large gloves like last time. Sungmin nodded his head towards Selgerus.

“It’s fine. I wasn’t really urgent in getting a weapon.”

“It’s because you gave me additional money mid way. That made me take longer time than expected.”

Selgerus leaned down while saying that. She picked up the spear that she had put on the ground.

“I haven’t named it.”

Said she.

"I don't have a great naming sense, and I also think it's somewhat funny to give a weapon a name. After all, all a weapon needs to do is to do what it needs to do."

Sungmin couldn't focus on her words. His gaze was stolen by the spear that Selgerus had shown him. It was... very fitting to be a weapon, no, it was a very weapon-like weapon and could not be said to be anything else. Well, a spear to be exact.

The length was about 3 meters, and the ramrod straight spear shaft was made of a mysterious glossy metal. The red tassel was long and abundant, while the shoe of the spear was sharp enough to be used as a weapon of its own.

What charmed Sungmin the most was the sharpened spear head. The double-bladed spearhead was long enough to be used in slashing moves and not just piercing. Although it had a dark color overall, Sungmin liked it better this way.

(T/N: Traditional Chinese spears have red tassels at the 'neck' of the spear, while there's a sharp point at the opposite end of the attacking end, making it easier to pierce the ground to make it stand up – named 'shoe' in this context.)

He felt that this was designed tactically and not for showing off. Sungmin had not come across many good weapons, much less use them, but the spear Selgerus made was enough to win him over.

"The main metal is mithril."

Selgerus suddenly grabbed the spear with her two hands."

"It's a metal that has high affinity with mana, that is, qi. Its sturdiness changes according to the qi exerted. Using sword-qì and sword force will be less tolling. And I've enchanted self-restoration magic, so if you exert qi, most damage will be repaired on its own.

It would be a different story if the spear was snapped in half, but at that time, bring it to me. I'll repair it for you."

(T/N: Sword force is a realm above sword-qì. 劍強, I dunno why author is using 'sword' here... when it's supposed to be 'spear'.)

“I wish to use it for myself...”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Selgerus nodded her head. Nevel appeared in front of her. Nevel received the spear from Selgerus and then moved next to Sungmin.

“Here it is.”

Sungmin received the spear with both of his hands. The first thing he felt after receiving it was that it was ‘light’. Despite having a length of nearly 3 meters, the spear was still very light. However, it did not feel like it was weak either. He tried swinging the spear on the spot. The shaft of the spear felt as though it was made just for his hands, and it made a good sound whenever he swung it.

“Do you like it?”

Asked Selgerus. Sungmin swung the spear a few more times before nodding his head.

“Yes.”

He had never held a weapon of a better quality, so he couldn’t imagine something better. Selgerus laughed at his answer.

“It’s good that you like it... It’s a spear I created to suit the movements of your spear arts, so it will be easier for you to carry out your martial arts with it. Though, that’s up to you to try it out.”

Sungmin tried exerting his qi into the spear. The purple-colored qi wrapped around the spear head. The absorption rate of the qi was much better than the cheap spear he used before. Swoosh! His pierce action broke through the air at rapid speeds. Perhaps due to the weight, it was faster than before, but did not lack power in the slightest.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I did what I was offered to do.”

Selgerus replied while shrugging her shoulders. Then, she disappeared. Sungmin made a faint smile while looking at the spear in his hands. Sungmin also didn’t think that his naming sense was any good, and didn’t plan to name it.

"It looks like Miss Selgerus has taken a real liking to you."

Spoke Nevel with a smile.

"That spear of yours. The core is made with mithril, while it is coated with black mineral iron. Both of these metals are sensitive to mana, and therefore expensive. You have given her 60 million erre right? Most of it should have gone into the material costs.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. You can practically consider it free if you don't count the material costs. But for it to have such a degree of perfection... usually Miss Selgerus does not like people on our side.

Sungmin nodded his head while listening to Nevel's words. A strange level of good will he received from others – he was aware of this. However, it was hard to find out the identity of that good will. As such, he had chosen to accept it despite being wary of it.

"Rather than that. Would you like to take your next mission?"

"No, it's fine for today."

Today, he was planning to go to the mercenary guild. After he started taking missions through Erebris, and put his guard on against Xeon, he didn't really visit the Behengerr mercenary guild that much, but it was about time that he did. A few months later, the black mage's dungeon would be discovered. There was a need for him to show up on the mercenary guild in order to gather any information.

"Quite the rare face showed up today."

When he entered the mercenary guild, Bern, standing behind the bartender table, spoke to him with a smile. With his appearance, the mercenaries on the first floor became silent.

(T/N: First floor = ground floor.)

Sungmin had become quite a famous person while he did his missions during the past 3 months. The twin-headed troll was slain by him, and same went for the black minotaur and the lizard king. All of these monsters were above S-rank in power.

"Are you here to become SS-rank?"

Asked Bern as Sungmin approached. Sungmin made a bitter smile and shook his head.

“It’s not like that, but rather than that, I don’t see Mr. Ludd today.”

“He’s quite far away due to a mission. Why have you come today?”

“I’ve come to see if there are any missions that may catch my eyes.”

“There is.”

Bern replied as though he was expecting it.

“A dungeon was discovered.”

“...What?”

Sungmin made a surprised expression at Bern’s words. This was a very sudden matter. Sungmin had memories of his previous life. At this point in time, he had just begun his activities as a mercenary in Behengerr, and albeit faint, he still had memories of this time. However, never had he heard that a dungeon was discovered at this point in time.

“You know, didn’t you catch that ogre chimera 3 months ago?

“...Yes.”

Sungmin nodded his head with a rather stiff expression.

“We were suspicious and explored the nearby areas, and finally found a clue after 3 months. Although it’s a dungeon, it seems to be an artificial one and not a naturally-occurring one. Yes. It’s the black mage’s dungeon.”

The flow of events had changed.

Sungmin gulped and looked at Bern’s expression. The black mage’s dungeon, ‘originally’, it should have been discovered two to three months after this point in time. However, the flow of events had changed. In his previous life, the ogre chimera was not slain right after it was discovered, but as it was this time, the original flow of events had changed.

“it’s a rather rare case, so we are planning to make an expedition team using the mercenaries belonging to our guild. Although the specific date isn’t set yet... how about it? Would you like to participate?”

“...What mercenaries have decided to participate?”

“Xeon. Although not all of the Corona mercenaries are going, The three S-rank and five A-rank mercenaries have decided to participate in the expedition.”

This had also been changed. In his previous life, Xeon did not participate in the black mage’s dungeon. To be exact, he *couldn’t*. At that time, Xeon was doing a mission away from Behengerr with the core members of his group.

“...I will participate.”

Sungmin bit his lower lip but still nodded his head.

Although a variable had occurred, he could not give up on the magic armor.

Chapter 56

Variable (3)

“It has been a while.”

Kim Jonghyun was still in his lab in the basement of the mage guild. He made a faint smile towards Sungmin who came through the door.

The lab didn’t change much since the time Sungmin visited a few months ago. The only thing that changed was the identity of the corpse levitating in the air. Perhaps the research into the ogre chimera had been finished, as the levitating corpses belonged to several types of monsters. The smell was one thing, and it wasn’t a pleasant sight to see either.

“You’ve been laying low for a few months. Why have you come?”

Kim Jonghyun dragged a chair over and sat down. After his first visit, Sungmin never came to Kim Jonghyun again. Not only did he not feel that much attraction to the human being known as Kim Jonghyun, he also felt as though Kim Jonghyun was hiding something. Even if it was a taboo forced upon him by someone else.

“I have something to ask you.”

He knew that it was quite rude to suddenly come and ask him a question, but Sungmin was that desperate.

“What is it? Oh, and before you ask, I cannot answer what I tried to tell you last time. Like I said, it is against my wishes. I do not want to die after all.”

“I didn’t come here to ask that.”

“Then what is it? Oh, have you come to interrogate me just in case I leaked your secret that you’ve died once and came back to the past – to someone else?”

“It’s not that either. Didn’t you swear an oath to mana last time?”

“Yes, and that is absolute. A mage cannot go against that oath.”

Kim Jonghyun giggled as he said that. Sungmin looked at his face which was not that

far away from him.

The reason Sungmin didn't feel any good will towards Kim Jonghyun was simple – it was due to his meeting with Scarlett after the meeting with Kim Jonghyun three months ago. He had heard about what kind of person he was from her.

Kim Jonghyun was a black mage. It was unknown when he was summoned to Eria, but the being known as Kim Jonghyun was very heretic in the mage guild and he was receiving peculiar treatment. Kim Jonghyun had been living in Behengerr for almost 10 years now, but had not aged a single bit during those times. Scarlett didn't even know Kim Jonghyun's proper age.

On top of that, his actions were quite infamous. As a black mage, he was excluded quite a lot even inside the mage guild, and not only did he not mind that treatment, he was always absorbed in research he got from god-knows-where.

He looked very suspicious whichever angle you looked at him from, and Sungmin didn't plan to stay close to him.

“I wish to know about black mages.”

The reason he came to look for Kim Jonghyun despite all the stated reasons, was because the only one that could answer his questions was him. Neither Bern nor Scarlett were black mages. They wouldn't be able to answer questions about black mages, at least not in the depths that Kim Jonghyun could.

“Did you apply for the black mage dungeon expedition?”

Asked Kim Jonghyun with a smile. When Sungmin made an expression of surprise, Kim Jonghyun continued.

“Well, you can't really call this deduction. The fact that the Behengerr mercenary guild is searching for the black mage through the ogre chimera is known to practically everyone, and if you, a mercenary, came to me asking about black mages, it means that the black mage's dungeon is discovered.”

“...You're correct. The black mage's dungeon was discovered, and I've applied for the expedition.”

“I wouldn't recommend you to go, though.”

Muttered Kim Jonghyun. When he flicked a finger, a set of teacups floated in the corner of the room. When Kim Jonghyun had a look at Sungmin, Sungmin shook his head. In the end, only a single set flew towards Kim Jonghyun.

"The investigation into the ogre chimera was finished already. That was a very well-made chimera. The different organs and cells of different organisms did not reject each other, and capturing a strong monster such as an ogre and tuning it to suit the mage's needs requires amazing magical capabilities. I've said this last time, but the black mage that captured the ogre chimera is a very capable person. He, or she, is probably good enough to be called an archmage."

Bern would have said 'no way' if he was here. However, Sungmin didn't retort and kept listening.

"...That's why you don't recommend it?"

"No. I didn't say that because of the black mage's capabilities. I say this because the opponent is a 'black mage'."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A black mage at the realm of archmages, or above may see through your existence."

Like I did – he muttered.

"Black magic... is something completely different from normal magic. Their very fundamentals are different. Normally, magic refers to a phenomenon of using the mana in the atmosphere to form a formula to recreate a certain event. Put it simply, it's a car. Mana is the fuel, and the formula is the engine. And through 'will' the accelerator is pressed and the car runs. Don't tell me there weren't cars in the Korea you lived in?"

"There were. I understand what you said."

"However, black magic is different. Yes, black magic *does* use mana. Mana, formula, and will. Normally, magic requires these three things, but black magic needs another one: A soul."

"Soul?"

"This is a little bit like elementalism. Elementalism signs a contract with an elemental to use them. They promise something in that contract process, while black mages sign a contract with a demon god in price for their own souls."

"...demon god..."

"A demon god doesn't refer to a single entity. Strictly speaking, it's actually a contract

with a demon king that belongs to a demon god rather than the demon god... well, it's not like you're going to learn black magic or something, so there should be no need to tell you this in detail. All in all, the result is this. Black mages sign a contract with a demon god, that is, a demon king, and pays with their soul. As the magic is like this, black mages have the 'eyes' to see what exists and what does not. Like me."

Kim Jonghyun raised his hand to point at his own eyes.

"A soul is a very charming ingredient to black mages. The moment they get into a contract, they possess the eyes to see the soul, and offer souls with value to the demon king... or use them in various other ways."

Sungmin bit his lips. He realized what Kim Jonghyun was trying to warn him through this conversation.

"Of course, not all black mages will be able to see through your existence... but if there is indeed a black mage remaining in that dungeon, and that entity sees you... Fufu. I do not know this person, but he or she will be able to see through the value of your soul with that kind of capabilities. And then, something very interesting will happen. Yes, it *will* and definitely will happen. That black mage will do whatever it takes to acquire your soul. And such actions will probably not be something good in your point of view."

"...What about you?"

"Me? You mean me?"

At Sungmin's question, Kim Jonghyun burst out laughing as though it was something funny.

"I do not have any greed over you. Oh, that is because I'm different from normal black mages. In the first place, the black magic I've learned is... very peculiar even when compared against all other black mages existing in Eria. This is a power I've acquired through that not-funny monster incident in the country I've lived in."

"What's different about it?"

"I did not sign a contract with any demon king or demon god. Specifically speaking, the demon king I went into a contract with went and died. This is a very rare case... and the demon king I've signed a contract with was named Caladra of Lagress, but that demon king was suddenly terminated. The contract was forcefully undone, and the a portion of the black magiforce was transferred to me."

Kim Jonghyun spoke as though nothing special had happened, but his story was nothing to laugh about. In other words, Kim Jonghyun was freed from the contract that bound all other black mages to their contractors, and now possessed black magiforce that his contracted demon king once possessed.

“In that process, a portion of my body changed. I now no longer age, and not only do my eyes see the soul, they can see even deeper secrets. The reason I could read your existence was thanks to that, and as such, I do not desire your soul. However, the other black mages are different. They... will become greedy.”

Sungmin became silent. He deemed that it was worth it to come by Kim Jonghyun’s lab just because of that. Black mages with the capability to see the soul can realize that Sungmin is a being that has defied the law of cause and effect; and they will desire his soul.

Sungmin realized that something was conflicting. Msh and the mediators of Erebris also realized that Sungmin defied cause and effect, and even they desired his soul. However, Kim Jonghyun did not.

“Your eyes. Are they better in performance than the ones possessed by Msh, a god?”
“Performance! What an interesting word. Well... It’s hard to compare. I, a human, do not know what Msh saw, and knows about you. However, this is the absolute truth. I do not desire over your soul. Though, I’m interested.”

Saying those words, Kim Jonghyun put the tea to his lips.

“The reason a time traveler like you have to go to a black mage’s dungeon should be something good. However, it’s better if you don’t. It will be dangerous.”

“...And if the black mage isn’t there in the dungeon?”

“Isn’t the probability fifty-fifty? Well, a reasonable black mage will choose to avoid going against a mercenary guild expedition.”

“Can you help me?”

At Sungmin’s question, Kim Jonghyun laughed.

“That’s a bit difficult. I don’t have the personality to make enemies of my own accord. And also... I do not want to slay a colleague that walks the same path.”

Though, I do not plan to prevent it either – added he.

After the conversation with Kim Jonghyun, Sungmin left the mage guild. He momentarily thought about asking Scarlett for help, but shook his head. In his few meetings with Scarlett, he became close to her, but he felt that he did not become close enough to ask something like this. Moreover, he didn't want to ask her for help in something like this since it had nothing to do with her.

'What do I do?'

It was as Kim Jonghyun had said. The probability was fifty-fifty. Although this was 3 months early, would the black mage still be there, or not? If the dungeon was discovered 3 months later like it was supposed to be, Sungmin wouldn't have worried so much. He knew that the black mage wasn't there.

However, it was different now. 3 months. What kind of effects does this variable have; and was this worth the risk?

His worries ended quite soon. The bottleneck that he was facing was too high and sturdy. He needed help from the magic armor. Although he didn't know whether the magic armor would actually help or not, he still had to try.

What was fortunate, was that Sungmin wasn't alone in this expedition. Bern, the guild master, was participating, and other S-rank mercenaries were participating as well with their leader Xeon. Mercenaries of other groups will also participate.

In the end, Sungmin came to a decision.

to participate in this expedition.

Chapter 57

Variable (4)

(T/N: I'm gonna have to use the word 'cultivation', I can't put it in any other way... sorry if this makes you cringe)

The expedition force was created very quickly. Bern, the head of the Behengerr mercenary guild, and Xeon, the leader of the Corona mercenaries, was participating in this expedition. This was one of the biggest expeditions in the past few years of the Behengerr mercenary guild.

Although he had retired after becoming the head of the guild, Bern was an SS-rank mercenary. Although he didn't have any breakthroughs and his power was halted where he was before, his long years of experience and skill as a mercenary wasn't something to be ignored.

Xeon was the same. He had learned the martial arts of the Shaolin and was participating together with three S-rank mercenaries and 5 A-rank mercenaries from his own group. Other than that, there were four S-rank mercenaries and 10 A-rank mercenaries from other groups, and two A-rank mercenaries from freelancers.

And there was Sungmin.

Sungmin felt that this was definitely a lot different from his previous life. There were no participants of B-rank and below; whereas in his previous life, B-rank mercenaries were the main combatants when the black mage dungeon was broken through.

The reason such a small-scale expedition team was created was because back then, it was judged that the dungeon was not so dangerous. However, this time, it was different. The existence of the ogre chimera was spread, and the fact that the lord of that dungeon, the black mage, was a very capable one, was known to everyone. Thanks to that, weak mercenaries didn't even apply for the expedition.

Sungmin felt that this was instead better. As long as the danger of the existence of a black mage existed, it would be better if the expedition force was stronger. What he

was worried about was that Sungmin would not be able to profit as much with all the strong people gathered here.

'No, I still remember the location of that magic armor.'

Although Sungmin had never got his hands on the magic armor, he remembered the location where the magic armor was located. As long as he moved according to his memory, he should be able to get his hands on the magic armor first.

2 SS-rank, 8 S-rank, 17 A-rank.

A total of 27 people departed for the black mage's dungeon.

The dungeon was discovered at a mountain nearby the village where the ogre chimera was found. Ten carriages carried mercenaries to that location. As the Corona mercenaries used their own carriages, Sungmin was not able to see Xeon or his men.

Instead, Sungmin rode together with Bern and the freelancer mercenaries. Sungmin felt that it was fortunate for him to have become close to Bern. Although it was unknown if that was due to his strange ability of his, friendship resulted in good will.

"I didn't know I would see a famous figure of Behengerr like this."

One of the freelancer mercenaries sitting in front of Sungmin muttered. He had wide shoulders and rough muscles. Jung Chul. This was a name that Sungmin remembered. He was a martial artist who trained in external martial arts, and was an A-rank mercenary not belonging to any group.

"You really are younger than I thought you'd be. How old are you?"

Tang Misook. Although she was known to be from one of the famous families of the martial world, the Tang family, whether that was true or not was only known to her. However, most people presumed that she was not from the real Tang family. After all, if she was, she wouldn't be doing dirty work like being a mercenary. It was just that she called herself as Tang Misook, called herself as from the Tang family, and that she used hidden weapons, so everyone thought 'yeah, sure'.

(T/N: The Korean pronunciation of 'Tang' is 'Dang', but I'll leave it as 'Tang' here. I don't know what the characters for 'Misook' are, so I can't Chinese-fy that.)

"I'm 18."

"I heard you were a no-class. I always thought that no-classes that surpass the peak level were freaks like Xeon. But it seems I was wrong."

Jung Chul giggled as he muttered. Sungmin didn't react to Jung Chul's words. Bern, who was meditating next to Sungmin narrowly opened his eyes.

"Why don't you cut your useless crap and circulate your inner martial arts? We're going to enter the dungeon as soon as we arrive."

"I know that. But huh, a black mage dungeon. It would be good if I could pick up an artifact or something."

Jung Chul grumbled and closed his eyes. Tang Misook also didn't speak anymore and meditated. Sungmin gripped and loosened his hands repeatedly as he looked outside the window.

It was still early dawn. By the time they arrived, it would be noon, and they would immediately enter the dungeon. What Sungmin had to think about wasn't just the black mage. Xeon – he had to be wary about Xeon as well. Although Xeon didn't do anything for the past 3 months, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't do it here.

And also.

Something was strange – when he felt that, it had already start.

Dungeons were like natural disasters – they appear suddenly and without warning. Dungeons created like that can be considered the crystallization of non-common sense that people cannot predict at all. However, this dungeon was different. This dungeon was created by a 'human', and to be exact, should be considered a 'workshop' that the black mage created in order to hide his whereabouts and protect himself and his research.

What this meant was quite clear. This dungeon, in a human's point of view, was created specifically to defend against the intrusion of other humans.

The first to die was Jung Chul.

As an expert of external cultivation, he was at A-rank and did not pass the wall of the

peak level, but was very confident in his own arts. He stood at the front, and did not doubt for a moment that his body was sturdy.

And his body, was ripped apart to pieces.

A black arrow that flew out of nowhere pierced through his heart. To a martial artist at a level of Jung Chul, the Self-Protection Force (*T/N: A common defensive martial arts skill name in Korean Wuxia (護身強氣)*) was not something he could use. His body trained through external cultivation was pierced by that pitch-black arrow, and his body swayed.

“What the!”

Someone voiced out in surprise. It was before Jung Chul had even fallen on the ground. The shadow under the torch flickered as though dancing. Something came out of that shadow and flew towards Jung Chul, it was before Jung Chul, pierced by the arrow, could say something about it.

His body, trained in external cultivation was torn apart like tofu. His inner organs poured out and blood splattered everywhere. Sungmin hurriedly took out his spear in accordance to the warnings that his sixth sense had given him. His spear, made of mithril and black iron emitted light in this darkness.

“Jung Chul!”

Bern shouted. He swung his staff and his staff shot light. The white light swallowed the light of the torch and shone the inside of the cave.

A monster clad in pitch-black scales was on top of Jung Chul’s corpse. Although it looked like a mantis, its form was incomparably more hideous.

“A chimera...?”

Xeon frowned as he muttered. Although there were a lot of monsters that looked similar to a mantis, a monster that looked like what was in front of him didn’t exist in his memories. Bern stiffly nodded.

“The fact that a chimera is protecting this place means that the black mage is still here...”

Spoke Xeon as he raised both of his hands. As an expert in the Hundred-steps Divine Fist, Xeon did not use weapons. His fists, as well as his entire body, was his weapon.

The sphere of light that Bern had created floated high in the air and shone deeply inside the cave. Chimeras in various hideous forms were everywhere.

“This is just the entrance and it’s already so tough.”

Although Xeon said that, he didn’t look threatened to his life at all. Sungmin held his spear next to Bern and watched the situation. The chimera that killed Jung Chul swung its scythes towards Xeon. It was as though it was trying to threaten Xeon.

“Damn bug.”

Muttering that, Xeon walked forward. Xeon’s left fist flashed gold, and he punched forward.

Poof, and the chimera that threatened Xeon was pushed back quite a distance. An invisible punch shrank the distance and shot towards the mantis. This was Shaolin’s Hundred-steps Divine fist. It was called that because one who trained in it would be able to punch an enemy a hundred steps away.

Although it was pushed back, the chimera did not die. It quickly regained its posture and jumped towards Xeon, and Xeon punched forward with his right fist again. Psh! A definitely hitting sound became Chimera’s last words as it crumbled down.

“Let’s go.”

Said Xeon. The mercenaries, who were panicked by Jung Chul’s sudden death, regained their confidence when Xeon said that. S-rank mercenaries walked up forward and A-rank mercenaries followed suit. Bern readied his magic from the back, and Sungmin also moved forward.

When he moved.

Sungmin felt a gaze. This was a warning from his sixth sense. He looked towards the direction he felt the gaze from, and at the end of it was Xeon. Xeon was looking at Sungmin while gripping and loosening his fists. Sungmin was about to use the

Shadowless Phantom, but stopped.

Instead, he used Lightning Steps to rush forward.

He couldn't show everything he had to Xeon – that was what he thought. Although he used Lightning Steps after such a long time, the speed was incomparable to the last time he used it thanks to increase in his cultivation.

Having walked to the front, Sungmin swung his spear widely. He didn't plan to show everything. Like how he hid the Shadowless Phantom, he was planning to hide the Nine Skies Infinity Spear as well. However, hiding too much wouldn't do him good. There was no good to tell Xeon that he was hiding something. Sungmin decided to mix Nine Skies Infinity Spear with the Autumn Soul Spear (Chu-hon spear technique(??)) and showed more of his basics rather than his techniques.

Pierce – his spear shot out straight ahead and penetrated the head of a chimera. Although he felt some resistance, it was nothing compared to the ogre chimera. When he looked around. The other S-rank and A-rank mercenaries were fighting chimeras as well. This was just the entrance of the dungeon. The chimeras that protected this place were just the gatekeepers.

"Get low!"

Bern shouted from the back. It seemed as though he had finished casting. Sungmin immediately pulled back and lowered his head, and the other mercenaries did the same. Dying from an ally magic would be a laughable, vain death.

A pitch-red fire shot forward. That fire covered the walls of the cave as it swallowed up the chimeras. The chimeras trembled in that fire. When the flames had disappeared, there were no chimeras remaining. A mage that was close to the archmages in power had instantly killed dozens of chimeras at once.

"Pushing yourself, eh."

Xeon laughed at him, but Bern didn't say anything to that. Bern took a deep breath and took off the hood on his robe.

"It seems that the black mage is still here, but there's nothing big to worry about! Let's go!"

At Bern's shout, Xeon shrugged his shoulders and took the Corona mercenaries forward. The other mercenary groups also gathered around, and Sungmin stayed next to Bern. As a freelancer, Tang Misook also went with Sungmin and Bern.

"What do we do about the corpse?"

"...We'll handle it later"

Bern answered without looking at Jung Chul's corpse. Jung Chul was unlucky. That was why he died.

Deaths were mostly like that.

Chapter 58

Dungeon (1)

Something has gone very wrong – it didn't take a lot of time for everyone to realize that.

The chimeras at the entrance of the cave were only the gatekeepers, and they weren't the end of the danger that existed in this dungeon. In fact, they were nothing close to it. Jung Chul's death was unlucky, like most deaths.

Perhaps that was for the better; because he would have felt less fear.

Screams resounded in the pitch black darkness. Sounds of crashing, shattering, collapsing, and pouring. Most of the sounds were from screams, and were usually followed by the smell of blood. Even light, whether it was from magic or from the torch, could not light this darkness.

'Black fog'. These were the words that Bern shouted before the magic was casted. Sungmin did not know what kind of might this 'black fog' had. However, now he knew.

This fog... blocked vision. An assault from the darkness. His sense of direction was all messed up, and did not know where the other mercenaries were. Sungmin calmed his breath and strengthened his grip on his spear.

Sungmin was used to swinging his spear in the darkness. His sixth sense, trained in the mountain, allowed him to move even in this situation. Sungmin reflexively avoided the attacks from the monsters that came from where he couldn't see. Perhaps that attack was from a monster, a chimera... or perhaps a mercenary like him.

But that didn't allow him to be merciful in his moves. Although he wasn't able to see, he felt that he had pierced the opponent from the feeling he got from his hands. When he pulled out his spear with a deep breath, he felt something swaying and heard something collapsing onto the ground.

He swung, lashed out, or dodged with his spear several times like that, and eventually,

the darkness disappeared with a flash of light.

It took too much time to dispel the black fog. Bern panted but then frowned after looking at the scene in front of him. Although he casted his dispel magic while under the protection of shield magic... it was already after the intention behind the black fog had been achieved. On the floor were corpses of mercenaries and monsters.

“There’s too much damage.”

Uttered Xeon. Although he said that, neither he nor the Corona mercenaries had taken any damage.

“Should we retreat then?”

“We received so much damage, it would be a loss if we retreated now.”

Xeon shrugged his shoulders at Bern’s question. There were already more than ten mercenary casualties. Due to the black fog, all the other mercenary groups, except the Corona mercenaries, had been wiped out. Now, there were only 8 mercenaries A-rank, including Bern, Xeon and Sungmin, and the only one left of the A-rank was Tang Misook.

“I, I...”

Tang Misook, who had fallen on the ground, stuttered in terror. Her heart had already snapped after this incident. Although the floor beneath her was damp, no one laughed at her.

“...If you are not confident, then you may return.”

Muttered Bern to Tang Misook.

“But we cannot protect you. That is the same whether you go forward, or whether you flee... We don’t have that kind of leisure.”

“Ugh...”

Tang Misook trembled. She slightly raised her head to look behind her. The path was filled with monster corpses, and the entrance to the cave couldn’t be seen. They had already walked too far in. Although they did kill all the monsters that blocked their way in, would a path back be really safe? After hesitating for a while, she stood up

while staggering.

"I, I'll go together."

No one stopped her from doing so. This wasn't a good situation. Sungmin bit his lower lip. Over ten mercenaries had already died, and it was definitely that the lord of this dungeon, the black mage, lay deep inside.

This was a completely different turn of events from his previous life. In his previous life, there weren't many casualties in the dungeon expedition. The dungeon was already empty, and although there were a few magic traps left, there weren't any lethal ones. The expedition was carried out more like robbing an empty house, and the magic armor was.

The magic armor was...?

'Wait.'

He felt something was off. This was a very strong sense of unfamiliarity. In his previous life, the black mage was no longer in this dungeon. Then why were there various artifacts left in the dungeon including the magic armor? Using common sense, the black mage should have left the dungeon with those artifacts when he abandoned this dungeon, no?

This didn't make sense. The black mage dungeon was discovered 3 months earlier than in his previous life, and the black mage, that was supposed to be gone, was still here. Yes. That was acceptable.

Did something happen within those three months? Something so urgent that the black mage had no time to take those artifacts... No, these were all just hypotheses.

Amidst the doubt, the expedition kept walking inside. There were many other magic traps after the black fog, but due to their prior experience, Bern stood at the front and dispelled the traps beforehand. Thanks to that, the expedition's speed was slow, and Sungmin had plenty of time to organize his thoughts.

He couldn't think of a reason for the magic armor and the artifacts to be abandoned. A situation that leads to that... a situation where the black mage had to urgently leave. The expedition? Did the black mage choose to flee rather than meet the expedition

head on? No, he didn't think that was the answer. The expedition in his previous life was much weaker after all.

Then did the black mage run for another reason? Or...

“What are you thinking about?”

The one who spoke to him was Xeon. Sungmin flinched and looked towards Xeon. Looking at him making a nonchalant expression, Sungmin shook his head.

“...It's nothing.”

“It doesn't seem like you're nervous.”

Xeon laughed after staring at Sungmin's face for a while.

“Nor does it seem like you feel guilty.”

“...What guilty.”

“Didn't you kill your allies?”

Xeon made a smirk. Sungmin's eyes cooled down rapidly at those words. Kill his allies – Sungmin didn't need to think about what that meant. When the fog dissipated, some of the corpses of the mercenaries around him were due to a spear piercing their bodies.

“Aren't you being spiteful?”

Replied Sungmin while looking at Xeon. It was the same to him as well. The battle in the black fog – mercenaries attacked each other thinking that they were attacking monsters, and the weak ones among them died in the process. Xeon should have killed a few as well.

“Quite cold, eh... or are you pretending to be?”

“I think it's much better than being scared stiff.”

“I quite like you.”

Xeon showed his teeth in his smile.

“I like you more now that I see you like this.”

Saying that, Xeon walked past him. Hearing those suspicious words, Sungmin glared at Xeon's back, but did not reply to him. The priority was to break through the dungeon and slay the black mage.

There were no more chimeras. The magic traps no longer activated after a certain point. This was definitely strange.

"Were the monsters and traps simply to stall for time?"

One of the S-rank mercenaries muttered. It sounded very likely. Stalling enough time to run – the black mage might have given up resisting and may have left. The other mercenaries also nodded in acceptance, but Bern and Xeon did not.

Sungmin was the same.

The twisty path was leading underground. Although there were no stairs, everyone knew that they were heading 'down'. The torch did not flicker in the windless depths of the cave. Only the shadows moved in parallel. There were no traps nor monsters. It didn't smell of corpses and blood either.

The silence was horrifically annoying and fearful. It would be better if something appeared, or something happened – one of the mercenaries started humming. It wasn't anything worthy of compliment, but no one asked him to shut up.

The downward gradient levelled off. When they arrived in front of a large, closed door, the humming stopped. Xeon, who stayed silent all this time, took a glance at Bern.

"Is it a trap?"

Bern did not reply and closed his eyes. He swung his staff lightly to cast detection magic.

"No, it's just a door."

"I wish it was over already."

Muttered Xeon as he approached the door.

"I don't even want to look at caves for a while."

The door opened.

Beyond the door was a corridor with a large rug on the floor. This place had traces of a person living in it. Xeon glanced at the corridor and spoke.

“There are no presences.”

“Okay.”

Bern moved his staff. A large scale-detection magic swept across the corridor. Nothing was caught in it. There were no traps, nor were there any moving things. Bern frowned.

“Did he really run? Why?”

“Well, it must have been pressuring to fight us head on. There are two SS-rank mercenaries and the S-rank ones are intact too.”

Xeon muttered as he walked. There were numerous doors on the corridor. Sungmin heard his heart thump hard.

this was the place. He remembered back to the words that the mercenary with the magic armor spoke while he was drunk. A corridor with a rug. A painting on the wall. The door right next to it – inside...

“Let’s explore this place then.”

Although they still hadn’t completely let down their guards or nervousness yet, Bern spoke like that. Xeon and the Corona mercenaries did not listen to him. They were already opening the doors and looking inside them. There were no presences and magic detected nothing either. This place was safe – everyone accepted that.

Sungmin quietly walked forward. Tang misook, who was terrorized all this time, ran across the corridor and opened the doors that people didn’t open yet.

He walked across the corridor. Wasn’t this too easy? It should be a trap. It has to be a trap. No, even if he knew it was a trap...

Sungmin opened the door. Since the other mercenaries were opening and rummaging through the rooms, they didn’t care about what Sungmin did. Even Xeon, who Sungmin was wary of the most, was the same.

The room was like any other study. Sungmin approached the shelf where it was full of books. The books weren't anything extraordinary either. They were just books, and not magic books. Sungmin desperately combed through his memories as he searched the shelf.

A red book.

Title, 'That Night.'

He didn't know what it was about. It was probably a novel. In the first place, that wasn't what was important. When he pulled the book out, the shelf moved sideways. The hidden room showed it self. Is it there? – Sungmin gulped and entered the secret chamber.

It was there.

A pitch-black armor was hung on the wall.

Magic armor, Devnack.

Chapter 59

Dungeon (2)

Sungmin approached the magic armor with a nervous expression. It was a full-body armor that looked glossy-black. He had memories of seeing it before. The mercenary that acquired the armor in his previous life had always worn it. Though, that mercenary didn't even get to participate this time due to his low rank.

If he got his hands on the magic armor.

That, was one of his objectives ever since he had returned to Xenavis. This was true in his previous life as well. A low-rank mercenary with no notable skills became a peak-level expert with just this single magic armor. A life-changing opportunity – Sungmin always longed for such an opportunity in this life.

He grabbed onto the opportunity. Several times, in fact. The stone of transmigration was one of them, as well as the encounter with Wiji Hoyeon. Msh's mountain, as well as the meeting with Baek Sogo were opportunities as well.

And now, the magic armor in front of him – was also one. Sungmin approached the magic armor with his hands.

The moment his hands touched the armor. The chestplate of the magic armor on the wall suddenly opened like a jaw and swallowed him. When Sungmin took a step back in panic, the pitch-black armor was already on him.

“...Huh...”

Sungmin looked down at the magic armor that he was wearing. It was now worn by him... but he couldn't feel any change. Sungmin quickly checked the inner cultivation in his dantian. There was no change in that. There were no changes in the physical body either. After scanning through his body, he was confused.

(T/N: Some people were confused about ‘cultivation’ last time. ‘inner cultivation’ is training the ‘qi’ and circulating it throughout the body, while ‘external cultivation’ is

tempering the body to make it as tough as..."stone" "diamonds" etc... if you have read desolate era, 'fiendgod body cultivation' is like the 'external cultivation' here.)

Nothing had changed at all. How? Did the armor change? No, that couldn't be confirmed right now. To check the function and name of this armor, he had no choice but to ask a professional appraiser to check.

"Do you like it?"

A low voice tickled Sungmin's ears. Sungmin turned around in surprise.

A man clad in pitch-black robe was standing there. Sungmin voiced out in surprise and held his spear.

"Magic armor Devnack. It's quite a decent item. Though, the rebound is quite big."

"...What?"

The black mage muttered. He didn't look flinched at all even though Sungmin was ready to attack at any moment and he was only standing a few steps away from him. In fact, the one flinching was Sungmin. His sixth sense trained in Mount Msh, was warning him.

To not fight whatever was in front of him.

"Do you not feel any change?"

Inside the hood of the robe was only pitch-black darkness. Although the face couldn't be seen, the voice belonged to that of an old man.

"That's quite strange."

The black mage muttered. Well, that's not the important part – uttering that, the black mage's robe started to expand.

"I don't like rude guests, but... fufu! So I get to meet a person like this in my life. To think I'll meet a soul with a twisted karma..."

Sungmin's body stiffened at the black mage's muttering. He did not wait anymore and charged towards the black mage. His full-power Shadowless Phantom created

afterimages. The few steps of distance between them instantly became nil, and a spear clad in purple qi pierced through the black mage.

Claaaang! Along with a resistance that nearly ripped apart his palms, Sungmin's body flew backwards. His inner cultivation flowed in reverse and damaged his meridians and made him vomit black blood. Crash! After destroying a closet, he rolled around several times on the floor and groaned.

“Don’t be rash. I feel very good right now.”

The black mage laughed. It felt as though something heavy had settled on his chest. Sungmin bit his lower lip and stood up. Due to the disturbance, he could hear running footsteps from the corridor.

“What is it!?”

The mercenaries that entered through the door all became stiff. They looked at Sungmin, collapsed onto the floor in the middle of the room, and the black mage that was standing intact and quickly came to their own conclusions. Bern, who came a little late, shouted out.

“Black mage!”

“Intruders.”

The black mage muttered. The black mage slowly raised his hand to point at Bern. After looking at the black mage’s hand under the sleeves of the robe, Bern’s expression paled.

“L, lich...!”

“Shh.”

A loathing laugh-like voice came out from inside the hood. The long fingers didn’t belong to a living human – it was made of bone. A pitch black light flashed at the fingertips, and a death ray aimed for Bern.

Poof! Xeon, who was near Bern, quickly swung his fists. The Hundred Steps Divine Fist clashed with the black mage’s attack. The black mage muttered while clicking his ‘tongue’.

"It's the Hundred Steps Divine Fist from the Shaolin. So, you're Xeon who's quite famous around Behengerr."

"...You know me?"

Xeon asked with a stiff expression. The black mage did not reply, and instead took off his hood.

What appeared was not a face. It was like... a lump of darkness. Inside the spherical darkness was a pair of cold-blue light that looked like the eyes.

This was the first time Sungmin saw a lich. However, he had heard of the rumors. A monster that is birthed from a mage giving up his or her own body and soul in exchange for eternal life. Yes. Liches were classified as monsters, and one of the worst ones at that. Liches possessed magical capabilities on par with an archmage, as well as immense mana that they gained through giving up their body and soul. They also possessed memories of when they were human, as well as a human-like thought process, so they were enough to be called the worst monsters.

"Originally, you wouldn't even be able to come here."

The lich muttered. Bern, who ended up being saved by Xeon, took steps back with a pale expression. As a mage, Bern knew what kind of horrific and fearful beings liches were.

"But not today. You saved me the trouble of getting some experimental bodies. Though, I was originally planning to use the ogre chimera..."

The lich uttered some incomprehensible things as he raised his hand. Darkness arose beneath him and wrapped around his arm. Bern quickly went into casting. Although no one knew what kind of magic that Bern was trying to cast, this was for sure.

Bern was slower than the lich.

Booom! The darkness shot out. One of the mercenaries, standing there blankly, was swept away by the darkness. An S-rank mercenary died a vain death. When the darkness faded out, only the bones were left.

"R, run!"

Bern shouted. His magic exploded towards the lich. A wave of red flames assaulted the lich. The lich made laughing sounds and made hand signs.

“You don’t know of your position.”

He didn’t even do any incantation. An instantaneous shield blocked Bern’s magic. Tang Misook turned around and ran while screaming. However, she could not. A blade shot out from the ground and cleaved her in half.

“Didn’t I say so? That you shouldn’t even be able to come here originally. I led you here.”

The lich muttered. Xeon ran forward. Rather than running, he chose to fight the lich. He judged that it would be impossible to run away without killing the lich. Xeon wasn’t the only one to think that. The surviving S-rank mercenaries all charged towards the witch; Sungmin included.

The lich did not look hurried at all. In fact, he looked as though he was enjoying the situation. It was as though a predator was watching its prey dancing on its palms. Sungmin clenched his teeth and assaulted the lich from behind. The spear in Sungmin’s hand spun around wildly. He no longer sought to hide his prowess in front of Xeon.

“You stay still.”

When his spear came into contact with the lich’s shield, the lich muttered those words. It was as though... space was being twisted. Sungmin’s spear slid on top of the shield. The trajectory of his spear was forcefully deflected away. The lich had used spatial distortion magic in such a short time to deflect his attack.

“I can not bare to injure you. I can’t lose such a valuable soul.”

Saying that, the lich changed his hand signal. Even at this moment, Xeon and the other mercenaries were struggling to penetrate the lich’s shield. The lich ignored all of their attempts. It wasn’t even worth it. The lich was more concerned about Sungmin than the rest put together.

Suddenly, pitch-black chains shot up from the ground and bound Sungmin’s limbs. His body rolled on the ground.

“Stay still like that.”

The lich spoke with a laugh. Sungmin tried to get himself back up, but the tight chains did not let him go. His expression twisted.

Bern died like this – poof. An explosion took away the top half of his body, and his legs fell down backwards. The lich’s shield was still intact, and whenever he flicked his fingers, the number of corpses increased.

Sungmin watched as all of this happened in front of him.

He saw the deaths of others in this powerless form. Time flowed very slowly as though it had stopped. Why am I lying on the ground like this. Why am I so powerless. Sungmin’s body started trembling. When he climbed down Mount Msh, Sungmin thought himself to be different from his past; that he had changed. Although he didn’t become a cicada, he thought that he was getting closer to being something else.

And the reality?

This was the reality.

Sungmin collapsed onto the cold, hard floor. He was not able to resist even if he wanted to. The lich was a freak. Sungmin now knew of the prowess that a being known as an archmage could use. The SS-rank Xeon was being played a fool, while Bern, who was also nearing SS-rank, had already died.

And then

The battle finished. The surviving ones were Xeon and three S-rank mercenaries. They were bound by black chains on the ground, just like Sungmin.

“This should be plenty. SS-rank merc, eh... better than the ogre chimera, I guess.”

The lich spoke in a joyous tone. He did not care about the corpses rolling on the ground and moved his hands. Sungmin, Xeon, and the three mercenaries floated in the air.

“Well, let’s go.”

The lich swung his arms.

"The coming days will be a joyous one."

The lich's voice was very frightening as he said those words.

Thump.

Thump thump.

Deep inside the ground, the thumping sounds of the heart could be heard.

Chapter 60

Heart (1)

“It might sound a little strange to you, but I’ve always wanted to become a woman.”

The lich looked to be in a very good mood. And due to that he started uttering nonsense, and the lich’s nonsense sounded strange, just as he said. Not a little, a lot.

Bound by chains, Sungmin’s back was against a wall. The chains that bound his limbs were impossible to break no matter how much internal cultivation be brought out.

“To be exact, it’s not a woman... I wanted a body that could have a ‘child’. Oh, of course, men can make children as well. But strictly speaking, that isn’t giving birth, but helping so that a child can be born.”

Sungmin didn’t know what the difference was between the two, but he was not in a state where he could ask. Even if he wanted to speak, his lips would not move. This was that kind of magic.

“I’ve tried all sorts of magic, but the sex I was born with couldn’t be changed. The only beings that can change sexes are dragons, who are born genderless, and can use polymorph magic, and humans cannot use polymorph. Do you know why? It’s because of the law of cause and effect.”

The law of cause and effect. Sungmin had heard those words several times, but had no grasp of what it meant. Amidst Sungmin’s forced silence, the lich kept moving.

“In the end, I lost hope at the limitations of magic. That’s why I became a lich. A curse that forces me to gain eternal life in compensation for my soul and body. But well, I was fine with it. There is no end to the path of magic, and I’ve walked that path for quite a long time, but I still couldn’t see the end of it. Treading on a path I do not know... it is a fearful yet such a joyous thing. Being passionate is good. It’s very joyful.”

The lich laughed creepily. Sungmin did not know what happened to Xeon and the other S-rank mercenaries. They were thrown into another room, and the lich no longer

cared about them. Only Sungmin came to this room with the lich.

“I’ve walked the path of magic for a long time, and my wishes as a human never came true. I lost my body after all. Even if I complete the magic to become a woman, I won’t be able to use it. Hahaha! What a contradiction. But it isn’t exactly like that.”

After laughing for a long while, the lich looked at Sungmin. The blue eyefire beyond the pitch black darkness showed no signs of any emotions. Despite that, Sungmin could feel the madness behind his voice.

“I cannot give birth, but I do have a way to create a child.”

Sungmin kept trying to move. His arms, his legs, and his lips. However, none of them listened to him. The magic binding was too strong. The lich was easily able to confront the SS-rank Xeon as well as Bern. He didn’t know of the lich’s name, but the overwhelming might that the lich showed was beyond any imagination.

“Chimerology is a very charming research topic.”

The madness-infused voice contained an inexplicable warmth and kindness. Of course, that was just what Sungmin felt, and it was very clear that those emotions weren’t directed towards him.

“Creating another life with existing life... this satisfies the things I’ve desired since I was human. Even though it may not be giving birth from my body. It’s not much different. A life I created is a child I gave birth to.”

The lich’s movement stopped. The magic formations that covered the ground looked very ominous even to Sungmin, who knew very little about them.

“The law of cause and effect cannot be disobeyed. A normal human will always be at fate’s will. Going against that flow means coming into contact with a fragment of transcendence.”

The lich muttered that and turned around. Bound to the wall, Sungmin glared at the lich’s face. Kim Jonghyun’s warning circled around his head. He was right. Sungmin shouldn’t have come to this dungeon.

“Today’s a good day. And also... a very lucky one. The one I saw in the past, who had

the same twisted karma as you, was a freak that I couldn't do anything about..."

Sungmin's body trembled violently at the lich's words. Sungmin tried to move his lips in attempt to voice something out, but his lips did not move at all. Even voice transmission was blocked, and so his question only circled around his mouth.

"With your soul as the sacrifice, my dearest wishes will become close to completion."

Saying that, the lich raised both of his hands. The magic formation engraved on the ground emitted ominous light. The incantation that the lich was doing sounded as though it was not of this world, that is, Eria. Just listening to it made Sungmin feel dizzy and his vision blurred.

He wanted to scream out loud, but his sealed lips did not move at all.

The long incantation finished. The magic formation no longer emitted any light. Instead, a freezing cold air engulfed the room. His breath froze white. The cold air seeped into his bones and his body trembled like a leaf.

"That" was in a form that was invisible to the naked eyes. It looked as though darkness had clumped together, yet it also looked like white fog. When he thought that, "that" became a man, and then a woman. Depending on what Sungmin thought, it endlessly changed form, and Sungmin's mind shook after seeing those endless changes.

Fear.

Sungmin felt fear. He wasn't unfamiliar to fear. He had felt it several times. However, the fear he was feeling now was fundamentally different from the fear he had felt before. A mysterious something that he knew nothing about – looking at that inexplicable thing was eroding his mind with crazy fear.

"I offer this sacrifice."

Both of his hands raised, the lich slowly kneeled down. The lich, that showed extraordinary might, was not kneeling down and worshipping.

The being's gaze headed to Sungmin. When the two gazes met, Sungmin felt as though his head had exploded. The pain he felt made him wish that his head had exploded instead.

“...What?”

A moment later, the lich let out a voice of surprise.

“W, wait. What do you mean by that? Something... no, that can’t be. That can’t be true, right? Jus why...?”

His head ached. His breath became rough. Each and every one of his cells froze in fear, and his heart beat slowly. Death. He felt... death looming over him. Just from that gaze, Sungmin imagined death.

“That’s... no way.....”

The lich muttered as though everything was in vain. The gaze of the being that was looking at Sungmin, was no more. Sungmin gasped a deep breath. Thump, thump – the heart that was beating slowly until it stopped started beating again. Sungmin’s body trembled.

“No... no. I shall offer another offering. Yes... so...”

The black mage struggled. He hurriedly rummaged around his sleeves and took out a large jewel. When the black mage put the jewel on the altar, the being’s gaze looked down at the jewel. The darkness, the fog, swallowed up the jewel.

Then, the being blurred out and disappeared. The magic formation drawn on the ground completely disappeared. The lich looked up at the air in vain, and collapsed down on his knees.

“The offering... was refused?”

The lich muttered in a powerless voice. After staring at empty space for a while, the lich suddenly stood up, he turned around to glare at Sungmin and his shoulders trembled.

“You... just what are you?”

That was what Sungmin wanted to ask instead. He didn’t understand what was happening.

“Even if your karma was twisted, you should have a value as an offering... no... your value as an offering should rise due to your twisted karma. But why are you not accepted as an offering?”

The lich muttered in a very confused voice. He staggered towards Sungmin. The lich's palm faced Sungmin. Sungmin, who was bound to the wall, slowly levitated towards the lich.

“Show me everything!”

The lich shouted. Blue eyefire glistened in the darkness. An invisible form of magic assaulted Sungmin's mind. It was a magic that forcefully extracted memories. Although it was efficient, the side effect was that the target would literally become an idiot.

Perhaps it would feel like this if ants crawled on top of the brain. Sungmin's body trembled violently. His eyes turned white. This was a sign of his memories being forcefully read, his mind being dominated, and his psyche collapsing.

That was how it was supposed to be.

“Kaaaaak!”

The lich suddenly screamed. He trembled as though being struck by lightning before staggering backwards and falling down. Sungmin's eyes still looked blank. The lich's trembling hands tried to grab his non-existent head. This was a ‘head’ache that he had felt for the first time after becoming a lich.

“Ah... Uuuuuuh! Khhh!”

Collapsed onto the floor, the lich screamed. The lich's psyche was shaken, and the magic that bound Sungmin's body disappeared. Falling onto the ground, Sungmin's body collapsed onto the floor powerlessly. After groaning for a long while, the lich swayed his hands and distanced himself from Sungmin. Half-crazy, the lich didn't even think about what to do with Sungmin. He just wanted to run. The lich did not try to understand the emotions and impulse that he was feeling. He just fled, just as he had felt. The lich's body disappeared from the chamber.

Not long after, the light in Sungmin's eyes returned. The painful headache had disappeared. Sungmin staggered as he tried to stand up.

"...Wh... what the?"

Sungmin didn't understand what had happened. The magic that bound his body was gone. The lich was nowhere to be seen... Where did he go? Sungmin hurriedly looked around. The lich was not in this chamber. He combed through his memories. The lich extended his hand towards him... and then... he couldn't remember what happened afterwards. Perhaps he had felt a strong headache and fainted.

What happened while I fainted? – thought Sungmin. He was alone in the room. No, that wasn't the important thing right now. Although he couldn't exert much strength into his body, he took a deep breath and put his hands against the wall to support himself. In a corner of a room was the spear he received from selgerus. Sungmin took his spear and headed towards the closed door.

He didn't know where the black mage was, but what was important right now was to escape this place.

Chapter 61

Heart (2)

Just what happened was uncertain, but this was for sure. That man is dangerous – The lich had lived for more than a century, but something like this was a first.

‘Magic reflection... no... it’s not that. If he had such a protection on him, my attack shouldn’t have worked at all.’

The lich put his hand against the wall to support himself. To a monster classified as a lich, the physical body did not mean much. The thing it needed to ‘survive’, was the ‘phylactery’ that they gain through the contract where they give up their body and soul. As long as the phylactery is intact, a mere body could be reconstructed anytime.

In other words, physical damage did not mean much to a lich. However, mental damage was a different story. To a lich, this was the most fatal type of attack – a mind attack.

“That thing... just what is his identity?”

His magic was reflected. It wasn’t simply reflected. The magic that returned... was fatal enough to almost destroy the lich’s mind. Even the hidden phylactery received damage.

‘It did not reflect any other types of magic. But... the magic that read and subdued his mind was reflected. What is it? Just what kind of protection...?’

There were several suspicious things about him. The Demon King of Fear, that the lich had contracted with, had refused that man’s soul as offering. “I cannot accept it,” the Demon King had said, and the lich had to give up his precious magic stone to compensate for summoning the Demon King.

“Damn. Just what is going on...!”

The lich kept moving while uttering in frustration. Due to the reflected mental damage,

it was very hard to move, and it was impossible to cast any magic. Never did he think that he would be put in such a state by a mere human, and on the level of a peak-level expert.

‘First, I need to regain the lost mana...’

The lich walked while dragging his robes. Sungmin... he did not touch his hands on. This was fear – something that the lich hadn’t felt in a long time.

The lich headed to the place where he imprisoned Xeon and the other S-rank mercenaries. This was a deeper place than his workshop. Here, the lich was researching into his dearest wishes, that lead him to becoming a lich in the first place.

Two hearts.

The lich looked at the two hearts floating in the air. They were required to implement his ultimate chimera research – mix two different species to create the ultimate artificial lifeform. This was the pursuit of chimerology.

The reason he made a chimera out of an ogre, was because he thought the ogres to be close to the ultimate beings in terms of land monsters that walked on two feet. However, the results weren’t satisfactory. First, it looked hideous, and second, it was hard to control. The life that the lich wanted to create was more beautiful, and stronger.

That heart was the ultimate essence of the lich’s research. If there was a flaw, it was that the body that would be its vessel was flawed. Originally, he was going to offer the soul with the twisted karma, and perfect the flawed body before transplanting the heart.

However, it had failed. The offering was refused. This was a first. The lich looked up at the heart and gritted his teeth. It didn’t matter. He didn’t want to touch that mysterious human, but he first had to leave this place with the heart, after refilling his mana. The lich approached the mercenaries.

“Cute little thing. Pretending to be asleep.”

The lich laughed. At those words, Xeon, who was out, flinched a little. Due to the magic backfire, the magic he had cast beforehand, was dispelled. Although the other

mercenaries were still out of themselves, Xeon, who was the best among them, had woken up and laid low.

“Did you try to ambush me when I showed an opening? Forget about it. Even if I’m not in my normal state, I can play with you like a toy”

The lich’s words were the truth. Xeon, who pretended to be unconscious, bit his lips and stood up. The lich ignored him and made hand seals. The bodies of the mercenaries around Xeon started floating in the air.

“It’s annoying... very annoying. To think it would go like this... I thought that the coming days will be full of joy... so it turns out mere mortals cannot be sure of the future...”

The lich spoke inexplicable words and stole energy from the mercenaries. Eventually, they collapsed on the ground, mummified. Seeing that, Xeon’s body trembled.

“...Will... I become like that too?”

“Huh? No, not you.”

The lich felt like living again now that he regained his mana. He laughed in pleasure as he looked at Xeon.

“I’m going to use you in a much more valuable matter. Yes. a soul of your caliber...”

“Prescan.”

The lich’s body trembled. Xeon’s eyes widened. Prescan – this was the lich’s name. The lich turned his head around while trembling.

A man was looking at the lich. The lich had its back against him, and did not realize that the man was here, and so was Xeon. That man... appeared out of nowhere like a ghost.

“I finally found you. To think you’d be hiding in a place like this...”

The man clicked his tongue as he muttered. The lich, Prescan, felt panic with shock and trembled.

“L... Lloyd.”

“So it seems you didn’t forget.”

Lloyd shrugged his shoulders and laughed. He slowly approached Prescan and raised his hand.

“It’s been 10 years, hasn’t it? I’ve been looking for you for ten years.”

“You... tenacious bastard...! You were still coming after me!?”

“Yeah. It was a boring pursuit. But you... what happened to you? You look weaker than you were ten years ago.”

Prescan did not reply. Never did he imagine that Lloyd would find him here today. This was some damned fate.

“Well... I guess that isn’t my problem. Even if I kill you here, I do not know where you hid your phylactery. Looks like it will be a boring pursuit again. Well, first is killing you here.”

Lloyd took a big step. Seeing Lloyd, Xeon felt a huge pressure and trembled. Although he was at the very limits of peak-level and was close to the exceeds, the pressure that Lloyd was giving out as he approached Prescan wasn’t something he could go against.

“You... damn...!”

Prescan shouted as he made hand seals. Immediately, magic energy shot up from below his feet. Lloyd snorted as he saw Prescan using magic. He also created hand seals, and the black magic energy that assaulted Lloyd was pushed back by a bright golden light.

“Even you at your full power will not be able to confront me. And you want to face me in your current state?”

“You... damned monster!”

“Who’s calling who a monster.”

Lloyd laughed mockingly. The golden light from Lloyd lightened up the dark cave. Prescan retreated a few steps back, and was faced with a decision. At this rate, he would receive fatal damage and lose his body, and will return to where his phylactery is. If that was the end of it, Prescan would have chosen that without hesitation.

However, it wasn’t. The two hearts. They were the ultimate goal of the wishes that

eventually led him to becoming a lich. In the end, Prescan bit his lips and shouted.

“Open your eyes!”

When he shouted, the hearts made a horn-like sound. One of the hearts thumped out like mad and enormous amounts of magic energy swirled around it. Lloyd flinched and looked at the air. He left the two hearts alone because he couldn’t feel anything from it, but it wasn’t like that now. The magic energy that the thumping heart pumped out as well as the ominous feeling was enough to threaten Lloyd.

“You... just what...!”

“Watch!”

Prescan shouted out loud. Although this was a forced decision, Prescan felt deep admiration and fear towards his ultimate creation. The swirling magic energy became a body. Lloyd hurriedly created hand seals and shot magic towards the heart, but his magic dissipated in the air without even approaching it.

The body was complete. What came down took form of a very young girl. However, it wasn’t human. The ominous magic energy that the heart generated was inside the girl’s body.

“You... just... what did you make...?”

Lloyd stuttered. Prescan opened his arms wide and shouted.

“The ultimate existence!”

As though answering to his reply, the girl opened her eyes. Although he did shout those words, both the heart and the body were still incomplete. Moreover, due to the urgent situation, no tuning was done either. Despite that, he had to do this in order to break through this situation.

‘I just need to perfect the remaining one. For now...’

However.

The girl’s state was strange. She only stood there blankly, and did not take any action. Prescan, who was looking at the girl’s back, suddenly shouted.

“Kill that man!”

The girl did not reply. She only looked up into the air blankly. The remaining heart in the air was silent. Lloyd’s wary gaze towards the girl flinched. Although he didn’t know how things were going, this was a perfect opportunity for him.

Lloyd changed the form of his hand seals. Craash! A golden wave assaulted the girl. The girl’s eyes at the heart lowered. Poof! Lloyd’s magic that was attacking the girl dissipated into thin air. Watching as the phenomenon reverted to pure mana, Lloyd’s mouth gaped.

‘Dispel? No, that’s not right. My magic was dispelled? Without a single incantation!?’

“Good!”

Prescan shouted in excitement. The girl turned his head around hearing that. Prescan stiffened up after seeing the eyes of the girl that looked at him. Although her emotionless eyes did not contain murderous intent, it did not contain any other emotions either. Prescan took a step back while looking at the lifeless eyes as that of a doll.

“Wha... what. I’m your master, no, I’m your father!”

“I know.”

The girl nodded her head and answered. For a very brief instant, pity flashed in her eyes. Instead, her eyes turned to Xeon.

“That’s fine, right?”

“...Huh?”

“I am hungry.”

The girl muttered. Before Prescan could do anything –

It happened in an instant. The girl was somehow before Xeon, and Xeon, an inner disciple of the Shaolin, and a peak-level expert, did not notice her approaching. Before Xeon could even react, death erased his consciousness out of his body.

Xeon died like that.

The girl pulled out her hand from Xeon's chest. Prescan dumbfoundedly watched the girl from her back. Lloyd also became speechless. Both of them did not see the girl's movements.

The girl stared at Xeon's heart in her hand, before opening her mouth wide and taking a bite out of it.

"Ha,ahaha..."

Prescan laughed in delight, and

"...Freak...!"

Lloyd became more hostile.

Chapter 62

Heart (3)

He remembered the words that the lich spoke. Value as an offering; karma. He felt chaotic. The memory of fear that remained in his mind still made him tremble.

He almost died. This was certain. But... he did not. He did not understand how or why he managed to avoid death. Why did that, inexplicable fear not accept him as offering?

‘There’s someone other than me.’

Sungmin approached the closed door. The lich had said, that he met a being with twisted karma once before. Although Sungmin didn’t know who this was, what was quite certain was that this being had the power to overwhelm the lich, who managed to play Xeon and several others like a fool.

Who is it? – he wanted to ask the lich, but that didn’t mean he could go find him either. Actually, there were a lot of things that Sungmin wanted to ask the lich other than that.

Right now, he was wearing the magic armor.

Magic armor, Devnack. An artifact that turned a third-rate mercenary into a peak-level expert. As he had wished, he did get his hands on the armor, but it did not affect him in any way. Regarding this, the lich seemed to be confused as well. Why did Sungmin not feel anything despite wearing the magic armor?

Booom!

The moment Sungmin left the room, a loud booming sound filled the entire dungeon. Sungmin voiced out in surprised and fell on his butt. What the? – he panicked and looked around him. The booming sound was coming from the floor and it did not stop.

Beings with enormous power were clashing. The lich... was the lich fighting? With who then? What happened to the other mercenaries? And Xeon? Questions kept arising, but he did not want to care about that.

He had to run.

He didn't know where the lich ran to. He didn't know why the lich ran, leaving him behind. The reason was not important. What he had to do now was to flee from this place and survive. His current prowess would not allow him to flee if he met the lich again. He felt bitter.

After his training in Mount Msh, Sungmin... became too full of himself. He gained power that he could not gain in his previous life. A peak-level expert, as well as an S-rank mercenary. He gained enough power to be treated well wherever he went in Eria. This made him arrogant.

He came to know what powerlessness felt like. The power that he gained for himself only amounted to so much. Against 'real' freaks, he wasn't able to do anything. Sungmin bit his lower lip. He was lucky. He was lucky... and survived.

Is that really the case though?

Reminding himself that there is no such thing as luck, Sungmin started moving again. Regret, self-blame, guilt – all of these should come after he left the dungeon.

The booming sound from the floor stopped after a certain point. The clash between strong beings also halted. Just what had happened? – trying his best to ignore that question in his mind, he walked forward when – [A mercenary?]

He was in the middle of looking for an exit, and someone talked to his mind. The voice did not belong to a lich. Sungmin stiffened up in surprise.

[Oh... don't be too surprised. I am not your enemy. The reason I'm talking to you is because I have something... to ask of you.]

The voice contained deep fatigue. Sungmin looked around in confusion.

[My name is Lloyd. I'm the tower lord of the Gold Magic Tower... Do you know of me?]

He did. The tower lord of the Gold Magic Tower, Lloyd. It was one of the archmages that were famous in Sungmin's previous life as well. Scarlett, the founder of the Lecire School, later became the tower lord of the Red Magic Tower, and Lloyd was one of the

archmages in Eria that was famous way before that.

However, Lloyd was dead. To be exact, he had gone missing. He was missing for almost ten years, so he could practically be considered dead. Thinking about it... the time that Lloyd went missing after he gained fame as an archmage, was around this time.

[I have a request. Right now, I am in a state where it's hard to move my body... can you help me out?]

“...Are you really Lloyd?”

Sungmin asked while stuttering. Whether Lloyd could hear his question was unknown but, [I shall swear upon mana. I am Lloyd. I am the Lloyd of the Gold Magic Tower. And also... I will absolutely not hurt you.]

Fortunately, Lloyd heard Sungmin’s question, and replied to him. To a mage, the oath of mana was absolute. Sungmin felt slightly relieved and asked again.

“What happened to the black mage... the lich?”

[Lich... You must mean Prescan, correct? He is not here. He fled.]

Lloyd replied. The cause of the booming sound seemed to be from the battle between Lloyd and the lich.

“How do you want me to help you?”

[First, please come to this place. You should be able to find your way here. Any more than that... is hard to say. I’m almost about to run out of magic energy.]

Lloyd’s voice became more powerless. Sungmin pondered for a short while, and Lloyd added for the final time.

[If you help me, I will reward you for it.]

Sungmin sighed. With the lich gone, there weren’t any others that could threaten him in this place. Especially since Lloyd swore upon mana. In the end, Sungmin went back to the place he came from and looked for a way down.

The tightly shut iron door had no lock on it. Sungmin opened the door and went inside, and found a staircase leading down. When he descended the stairs. It was moist, and it smelled of mold. When he climbed down, he arrived at a large clearing.

The cave was in an utter mess. The floor was cracked apart like a field in a drought, and signs of destruction were everywhere as though bombs had exploded. Looking around, Sungmin's face stiffened.

He saw Xeon's corpse.

Next to a mummified corpse, was Xeon lying down with a pale expression. He saw an impaled chest. The blood from the wound certified Xeon's death. Never did he imagine that he would see Xeon's corpse here.

In Sungmin's previous life, Xeon's death did not occur. Even when he became a C-rank mercenary and discovered 'that' dungeon, Xeon was alive and well. In this life, though... Xeon had died. The body of Xeon, who had surpassed the peak-level, made Sungmin feel very complex.

Sungmin was wary against Xeon. He heard advices from Ludd as well, and Xeon himself also had an attitude that made Sungmin wary of him.

"This way."

Before Sungmin could even approach him, Lloyd's voice rang out. Sungmin flinched in surprise and turned around to the place where the voice came from.

"I... am very lucky."

Lloyd's face was drenched in blood. He somehow managed to survive, but he could not avoid a fatal wound. Sungmin immediately approached Lloyd in quick steps.

"I did not think that there would be a survivor"

"What happened here?"

Sungmin crouched down towards Lloyd and asked. Lloyd coughed dryly, and his cough contained blood.

"Nothing much... I tried to kill Prescan... but his chimera was stronger than I imagined."

I was only able to make him flee since he was not at his full state. Thanks to that, I was able to save my life as well."

His questions were answered. Why did the lich leave the dungeon without even taking the magic armor – why was the Gold Tower Lord go missing.

In his previous life, this must be what happened: Lloyd discovered this place and fought the lich. Despite the lich's victory against Lloyd, he fled this place with a fatal injury. Not being saved, Lloyd died in this place.

"...What do you want to ask of me?"

"Please take me out of this place. I... cannot move because my magic energy has run out. The telepathy I sent you was with whatever little mana I had left."

Lloyd bitterly laughed as he spoke.

"And also... one more thing. That heart floating over there. Please destroy it."

Hearing those words, Sungmin lifted his head to look up. It was as Lloyd spoke. A heart was levitating in the air.

"Originally, I was going to do it... but as I said, I'm out of energy. But to destroy that later... there may be a possibility that Prescan will return later to take it, so I think it will be more comforting to destroy that heart right now."

"...What is that thing?"

"I do not know either."

Lloyd sighed as he replied. He fought an unidentified chimera girl as well as Prescan, and although he managed to make them flee, he did not know that that heart was.

"However, that thing is dangerous. That's for sure."

The chimera girl was strong. No, it wasn't simply 'strong'. The power she wielded was very strange and ominous. The two received fatal injuries and fled without even recovering that other heart, but it was unknown when they will return to take it.

"...Understood."

Lloyd seemed to have a difficult time speaking, so Sungmin nodded his head. He didn't

know what kind of impact him saving Lloyd, who originally went missing and died, would have on the future, but creating ties with an archmage wouldn't be a bad thing. Sungmin gripped on his spear and looked up.

The problem was quite trivial.

Sungmin was not able to fly. He wasn't even at a level where he could eject his spearforce. He did not have many methods to attack a levitating heart. Sungmin pondered a little bit before throwing the spear to the heart.

Fwoosh! His spear ripped through the air towards the spear. However, it was unable to penetrate the heart despite the force behind it. Even though he had exerted a lot of his qi into it, it decelerated as soon as it came close to the heart, and fell down without doing any damage.

"It won't be that easy."

Lloyd muttered with a dying voice. Even Lloyd's magic was unable to do anything to that heart. Sungmin clicked his tongue and picked up his spear again. Throwing his spear lacked strength. Sungmin estimated the height that the heart was floating on, and crouched down.

Taah! He leaped into the air until where the heart was. In the air, Sungmin took a deep breath and exerted a lot of his own qi into his spear.

Then, he pierced towards the heart. At that moment, the magic energy swirling around the heart expanded. That was a function to protect the heart from external forces. The thumping sound became louder and pushed back his spear. Sungmin bit his lips while feeling the resistance from the heart, and exerted more strength into his arms.

Thump.

The thumping of the heart resounded in his ears. His own thumping heart beat at the same rate. The spear continued forward, and after a certain point, the resistance he felt from his arms disappeared.

The spearhead collided with the heart, and penetrated it.

Did it pierce through?

Pop! The heart disappeared. Sungmin's spear pierced through empty air. Sungmin did not know what just happened and widened his eyes.

Sungmin's heart stopped beating for one moment. Feeling suffocated, he opened his mouth wide. Swaying in the air, Sungmin subconsciously let go of his spear. The spear fell down, and Sungmin's body fell with it.

Before he made contact with the ground, his heart started beating again. Thump, thump. The thumping sound of the heart could be heard in his ears. Hearing that sound, Sungmin felt unfamiliar. He immediately moved his body to somehow safely land, but the unfamiliar feeling of the heart thumping did not disappear. Sungmin put his hands on his left chest with a confused expression.

[You have acquired 'Black Heart'.]

A voice sounded out in Sungmin's head.

This was the same voice as when he gained skills.

Chapter 63

Heart (4)

'Black Heart? What's this?'

Sungmin looked down at his body in confusion. Clad in the magic armor, he could not feel any change. The distracting noise of the heartbeat had also disappeared. He couldn't hear it like he just did. However, he still had that strange feeling that something foreign was inside his chest. He placed his hand on his chest and calmed his breathing.

He first opened up his status window. He didn't know what this 'Black Heart' was, but since he heard a voice like when he learned skills, he thought that he should be able to check it on his status.

It was just as he thought.

-Black Heart.

The Lich Prescan's ultimate goal.

The problem was here. The skill he could check through the status window, like all other skills, was too vague. It said that it was Prescan's ultimate goal, but just what was his ultimate goal? The lich that Sungmin remembered, Prescan, was simply a mad scientist who wanted to become a woman and have a child.

"Uh... Sir Lloyd?"

Hesitating momentarily, he called for Lloyd. Lloyd asked him to destroy the heart, but he unintentionally acquired it instead. Sungmin felt the situation was difficult and called out.

"Sir Lloyd?"

However, Lloyd did not reply. Sungmin approached Lloyd in surprise. Collapsed, Lloyd

was still. Sungmin immediately checked for his pulse.

Fortunately, Lloyd had only passed out. His ‘fatal injuries’ didn’t seem that serious either. Or rather, it was progressing to that point. Sungmin could see that Lloyd’s wounds were regenerating at a visible speed.

Xeon, on the other hand had his eyes wide open, as though his death came suddenly. Sungmin let out a sigh and reached towards Xeon. His hesitant hands closed Xeon’s eyes, and he searched his belongings.

A small cloth pouch could be felt in his hands. Sungmin carefully took it out. Although the pouch was only palm-sized, he was able to put his arm elbow-deep into it.

When he searched around, various items could be felt. Sungmin grabbed one of them and took it out.

‘Hundred Steps Divine Fist.’

That was the title of the old book. The moment he read that, Sungmin’s heart thumped loudly. The Hundred Steps Divine Fist was one of the famed arts of the Shaolin, and it was what Xeon had learned.

When he searched around a little more, he found some more martial arts manuals. Sungmin exclaimed after looking at the manuals for Bodhidharma Cultivation art, as well as Arhat Movement art. These were both top-tier arts of the Shaolin. As he had learned the Purple Cloud Divine art and Shadowless Phantom movement art, Sungmin wasn’t too greedy over the Bodhidharma cultivation art and the Arhat Movement art, but he did want the Hundred Steps Divine Fist. He judged that it wouldn’t be bad to learn it just in case he was put in a situation where he couldn’t use his spear.

“Though, I probably won’t have much time to learn it properly...”

However, he should be able to use it in emergency situations. But since he couldn’t learn it immediately, Sungmin put the three manuals into his own spatial pouch. Then, he rummaged through Xeon’s spatial pouch some more.

Two wooden chests – one of which he had seen before. This was the chest that Xeon had offered to Sungmin when he invited him to join the Corona mercenaries. Sungmin gulped and opened the chest.

The Lesser Restoration pill – one of the secret pills of the Shaolin, was inside it. Sungmin wanted to dance in joy, but he suppressed the impulse and opened the other chest.

A sudden wave of fresh fragrance hit his nose. Within it rested a red pill, slightly larger than the Lesser Restoration pill. This was the Greater Restoration pill. Sungmin had never seen a Greater Restoration pill in person, but he had no doubt that this was it. Sungmin closed the chest with trembling hands and put them inside his own pouch.

“...Don’t resent me too much. It should be better for me to take it than let someone else take it, right?”

After muttering that to Xeon’s corpse, Sungmin searched around his corpse a little more. Unfortunately, there was nothing other than the spatial pouch. Sungmin took the spatial pouch, searching the remaining mercenaries’ belongings as well and taking them.

After taking everything he needed to, Sungmin went over to Lloyd and hoisted him over his shoulder. Then, he looked for a way out of the dungeon. As for the corpses of Xeon and the others, he wasn’t sure whether to leave them there or not. He originally planned to take their bodies back using a large-scale spatial pouch from Bern or the other dead people, but it didn’t go as he had expected. Other than Xeon and the mummified mercenaries, the others didn’t even have an intact corpse.

In the end, Sungmin climbed up the stairs carrying Xeon and the other mummified corpses in his bag, with Lloyd on his back.

It was a pity that he couldn’t take the remaining artifacts from the dungeon, but with the secret techniques and pills of the Shaolin, this was in no way a loss for him.

When he left the dungeon, the sun was setting. Since they entered the dungeon just before noon, at least 6 hours had passed already. Sungmin let out a sigh and looked at Lloyd who was on his back. Lloyd was still unconscious, but his breathing was regular.

Fortunately, since they left the horse carriages nearby the dungeon, leaving wasn’t an issue. The horsemen were shocked to see Sungmin returning with the unconscious Lloyd and other corpses, but when Sungmin explained to them, they accepted for the time being.

"Let's go back to Behengerr."

Said Sungmin in a fatigued voice. Although he only spent half a day in the dungeon, he... had gone through too many things. He felt as though his head was going to burst from all of the thoughts crowding his mind.

During the bumpy ride, Sungmin decided to take note of what he had learnt in the dungeon. He took out the note and pen from his pocket.

1. There is another being with a twisted karma. I don't know who, but from the way the lich said that he couldn't do anything about this being, I estimate that they have the ability of the exceed-level at minimum.
2. There is something other than twisted karma about me. Kim Jonghyun knows something about this, but cannot say it to me. The being that the lich summoned refused to take me as offering.
 - a. However, Msh and Nevel are desirous of my soul. I do not know what differences the lich's summoned being have to Nevel or Msh.
 - b. After I returned to the past, I'm receiving a strangely large amount of goodwill from others.
3. In my previous life, the magic armor turned a third-rate mercenary into a peak-level expert, but I feel no changes.
4. I have acquired something called the Black Heart, but I don't know what it is.
5. Lloyd, who originally died, now lives. Lloyd promised me rewards in return, but I don't know what I'll get. Mercenaries other than me are all dead. I acquired the Lesser and Greater Restoration pills from Xeon's body, as well as the secret arts of the Shaolin temple.

Sungmin had a look at the things he wrote down. When he put his raging thoughts onto the paper, he felt a calm wash over him. The problem was, writing them down didn't help at all in terms of finding any answers.

'In the first place, is there something to do with the stone of transmigration?'

Sungmin frowned and fell into thought. When he grabbed the stone of transmigration, nothing special happened. He just wondered what a stone was doing in that place, and not too long later, he died.

Still, he found it fortunate that there are people who could tell him the truth about the magic armor and the Black Heart.

When he arrived at Behengerr, it was already night. Sungmin immediately went to the mercenary guild to tell them about the tragedy that occurred, and showed Xeon's corpse as well as the mummified mercenaries as proof.

"Th, the guildmaster. What happened to him?"

The middle-aged mercenary that took care of the guild while Bern was away, hastily asked. He was Jo Young, an S-rank mercenary. Although they were acquainted, Sungmin wasn't so close to him.

"He has passed."

Regarding Bern's death, Sungmin also felt bitterness... Bern had been quite nice to him.

"N, no way...?!"

"I'll explain the details later."

"What? Where do you think you are going! What's more urgent than this?!"

"The Tower Lord of the Gold Magic Tower, Sir Lloyd, has been injured. The only reason I was able to survive was because Sir Lloyd appeared at the dungeon and chased out the Black Mage. In that process, Sir Lloyd received serious injuries."

"The Tower Lord of the Gold Magic Tower...? Is, is that true?"

Jo Young's eyes widened in shock. The Tower Lord of the Gold Magic Tower had an absolutely higher position than a mere branch head of the Behengerr mercenary guild. In the first place, Magic Towers were treated specially even amongst mages. A Tower Lord implied that Lloyd was in the top 10 in regards to skill and reputation amongst the entire mage guild, so it was no wonder that Jo Young was shocked.

"Yes. So first, I wish to take Sir Lloyd to the mage guild..."

"...Well... if that's the case, I can't stop you."

In the end, Jo Young could only hold back. He made a bitter expression while looking at Xeon's corpse in the carriage.

"To think the leader of the Corona mercenaries would die like this... even sir Bern... fuu."

Sungmin left the sighing Jo Young, putting Lloyd on his back again. The mage guild wasn't far from the mercenary guild, so it didn't take long to get there.

When Sungmin arrived at the mage guild, the entire guild flipped over. The news that the Gold Tower Lord was carried in injured was enough to shake the entire guild. Although it was late at night, the mages of the guild moved around busily and looked for a way to restore Lloyd.

"They're overreacting."

Scarlett approached, grumbling. Sungmin, who was leaning against a wall, gave a short greeting to Scarlett.

"I saw that his wounds were all healed. He only fainted because he ran out of magic energy. Once enough magic energy returns to his body, he should open his eyes."

"Doesn't that mean that there's no need to heal him?"

"Yes, but there's a need to show him that 'we did our best'. Only then would we be able to say 'we helped you out' when he wakes up."

Scarlett giggled. Her attitude showed that she didn't seem to like the beings known as 'Tower Lords'.

"Don't all mages admire Tower Lords?"

"What is there to admire? I don't like those old farts. They are always full of secrets. They never take disciples, nor do they ever share their knowledge with others."

It felt rather strange to hear that from Scarlett, who would later found the Lecire School, and become the lord of the Red Magic Tower. Although people change; what is it that made Scarlett have such a drastic change of heart?

"Rather than that, you... that armor looks neat. Where did you get it?"

"...I was lucky."

“I heard that the other mercenaries all died... You really were lucky. You should be thankful. If you died, I would have had a hard time sleeping.”

“You were worried about me?”

“Kid, you’re so cheesy. It’s natural that an acquaintance’s death would make me feel unpleasant.”

Scarlett grumbled and smacked Sungmin’s head.

“I was wondering why it was so noisy late in the night.”

Sungmin heard a familiar voice and turned around.

Kim Jonghyun, clad in a white gown, was standing there, yawning.

Chapter 64

Heart (5)

“Oho.”

Kim Jonghyun stopped sighing. He narrowed his eyes and looked at Sungmin. No, to be precise, he looked at the armor that Sungmin was wearing.

“That’s... quite the peculiar artifact.”

Said Kim Jonghyun with a strange smile. It was as Sungmin had thought. The black mage Kim Jonghyun, who expressed himself as a unique case, saw through the identity behind the armor on Sungmin’s body.

“I have some things to ask you.”

“This place is too noisy. Let’s head over to my room.”

Kim Jonghyun shrugged his shoulders. Sungmin shot a glance towards Scarlett. When their gazes met, Scarlett frowned and shook her head violently.

“I don’t want to enter that lunatic’s room.”

“And I don’t remember inviting you either, Miss Scarlett.”

Kim Jonghyun teased. Scarlett glared at Kim Jonghyun when he said that, and Kim Jonghyun only replied back with a smile.

“Well, then. Let’s go.”

Although Sungmin was concerned about Lloyd, he still had enough time to chat with Kim Jonghyun as Lloyd hadn’t woken up yet. Sungmin followed Kim Jonghyun to the basement.

“What happened?”

The room with levitating amputated limbs and guts was as gruesome as ever. Kim

Jonghyun offered Sungmin a seat and looked at him in interest. The sighing figure of his had all but disappeared.

“...Do you know the identity of this magic armor?”

“I do. I don’t know what it’s called, but I can see what kind of function it has. And I also understand what you’re concerned about.”

Kim Jonghyun laughed. He rubbed his hands and stared at Sungmin’s face.

“That magic armor is a type of contract. I said this last time, but the foundation of black magic is the contract with transcendent beings. That magic armor is an malevolent item that skips the official contract process and one-sidedly forces the contract.”

“...What?”

“Let’s see... I think I’ll need to touch it to be sure.”

Kim Jonghyun muttered those words and stood up. He approached Sungmin in large steps, then stroked on the magic armor that clad Sungmin’s body.

“Hmm. The contract is quite simple. it rapidly brings out the potential of the wearer.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Simply speaking, it’s this: Let’s say that there’s a third-rate mercenary. The potential of that mercenary is around a peak-level expert, but he wasn’t able to achieve that level due to his lack of effort. Putting this armor on would allow him to possess the skills of a peak-level expert without the necessary process to bring out that potential.”

An easy-to understand example. Sungmin remembered back to the events in his previous life and nodded his head.

“Isn’t that a good thing then?”

“Fufu! Didn’t I say so? That it’s a one-sided, ill-natured contract. The majority of contracts with demonic existences are for a lifetime. This third-rate mercenary would acquire that power in exchange for his soul. Do you know why black mages desire the souls of other humans, and valuable souls like yours? It’s to free their own soul, which is held captive by the contractor; to cancel that contract, and offer their souls to even stronger demonic beings.”

“Then...”

“Wearing that armor would force that contract. It means that the wearer’s soul would be held captive regardless of their intentions. However... from the looks of it, you don’t seem to be contracted with the armor.”

“...I felt no changes at all.”

“In that case, it’s one of two possibilities. One is that... you don’t have any potential to bring out, and two is that you have a soul that is impossible to contract with.”

Something flashed through Sungmin’s head when he said that. The being that the lich summoned refused to take his soul. It seemed as though the lack of forced contract had something to do with that.

...Or perhaps it was that Sungmin indeed had no potential left in him at all, but he didn’t want to think about that scenario. If that was the case, wouldn’t it mean that it would be impossible for him to grow any stronger no matter how much effort he put in?

“...Can you undo the curse on this armor?”

“That’s not so hard to do. But... what can you do for me in return?”

“...What do you want?”

“I don’t want anything great. I am... just curious. What happened in that dungeon? As you know, Lloyd, the Gold Tower Lord, is one of the strongest mages in the guild. If you told me he came back heavily injured... It would be difficult for me to believe.”

If he could get rid the armour of the curse simply by telling him some information, it wasn’t a terrible deal. Organizing his thoughts for a moment, he began explaining the events that occurred in the dungeon. Kim Jonghyun listened to him attentively.

“Prescan.”

When Sungmin started speaking. Kim Jonghyun nodded his head, repeating the lich’s name.

“So that’s the case. That dungeon was Prescan’s... then it’s natural for the mercenaries to all die.”

“...You know who he is?”

“Sure I do. Prescan was the Tower Lord of the Black Magic Tower, only comprised of the black mages among the mage guild. That is, until 10 years ago. He broke the taboo for his personal goals, and was exiled from the guild.”

“The taboo?”

“Human experimentation.”

Kim Jonghyun laughed as he said that.

"Oh, of course... most black mages experiment on humans, but what's important is whether they are found out or not. Aren't all crimes like that? As long as you aren't discovered, it's fine. In that sense, Prescan was rather unlucky. His human experimentation was discovered. Now I get why Lloyd, the Gold Tower Lord, headed to that dungeon. The one that was tasked with Prescan's pursuit 10 years ago was Lloyd."

"Was Prescan a lich back then too?"

"It would be rather difficult to find a black mage at the archmage-level that isn't a lich. Becoming a lich allows a black mage to gain power very easily. The downside is the loss of their body, but the ones that walk on the path of black magic are lunatics that are out of their mind. The loss of their physical body means nothing to them."

"Well, I am a rather special case," he added, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's a story that raises a lot of questions. Whether it's the fact that there's another being with twisted karma... or how Prescan tried to offer you as a sacrifice, but was refused. Hmm..."

Kim Jonghyun laid back on his chair, stroking his chin.

"...The demonic being that Prescan has contracted with is the 'Demon King of Fear'. The fear that drenches the abyss. A transcendent being that is also called that. As someone who did not contract with them, I do not know their name, but... this is a really unique case. Due to the aspects of his powers, the Demon King of Fear can make any non-contractor go crazy with just their gaze. However... you didn't go crazy. Well... I guess that's acceptable since your soul was refused."

"Why is that?"

"I cannot answer. This is the same reason as last time. Think about it yourself. It's not that hard."

Kim Jonghyun giggled as he said that. The room... suddenly felt rather chilly. Sungmin shivered lightly and touched the back of his neck. He felt as though a cold blade was pressed against his skin.

"...Because my soul belongs to a certain other?"

"I cannot answer."

"Because the being that possesses my soul is of a higher league than the Demon King of Fear, so the Demon King of Fear refused my soul?"

“I cannot answer.”

(T/N: “League” is the same word used in EER(“聯”))

Kim Jonghyun replied with his eyes closed. It seemed as though any gesture that may tell Sungmin the answer was forbidden.

“...Msh wanted my soul though.”

“I cannot answer.”

In the end, Sungmin gave up on getting answers from Kim Jonghyun. He couldn't criticize him. Kim Jonghyun wouldn't want to die after all.

“...The Black Heart. I don't know what this is.”

“...About that, it's rather strange.”

Creaaak, tap.

The chair that was leaning backwards came back to the original position. Kim Jonghyun crossed his legs and had a look at Sungmin's chest.

“The Black Heart... You told me the heart floating in the air suddenly disappeared, and was absorbed into your body. But I'm unable to read any unusual aura from you with my ‘eyes’.”

“...What?”

“That's what's strange. No matter how much more skilled Prescan is than I am, there shouldn't be something that I wouldn't be able to see... In this case, should I think about the connection between the soul and the psyche? No, even if that was the case, I should still be able to see it... Is it not magic but spellcraft-related? But it should still be in the same general category...”

Kim Jonghyun licked his lips and muttered. His words became for himself rather than for explaining to Sungmin.

“Oh... I'm sorry. It's one of my bad habits. In any case, I don't know what that heart is. However, this is for certain. Other mages will also not be able to notice the existence of the heart inside you.”

“...That's good, I guess, but I don't even know what it is.”

“What Prescan was researching, was the ultimate life.”

Kim Jonghyun's lips curved upwards.

"That was why he researched into chimeras. The identity of the human experimentation that became the reason of his exile was also an experiment to create the ultimate lifeform. He researched the topic for 10 years, and if the chimera with that heart put Lloyd, the Gold Tower Lord, into that state, the heart that was absorbed into you... should be an ingredient for the ultimate life form that Prescan wanted."

"I don't feel any changes though."

"Perhaps that's because the heart hasn't fully assimilated into you. Actually, it will be quicker to cut your chest open and confirm... but if I do that, I cannot guarantee your life."

"I refuse."

"It's a pity, but I guess I can't help it. Oh, and also, you said you were mentally dominated by Prescan, right?"

"Probably... yes."

"But you are completely fine and didn't go crazy. Fufu! The protection on you is rather special. Though, I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse that you're being defended by such a superior protection."

Muttering that, Kim Jonghyun's eyes glistened again as though he remembered something.

"Oh. I may not be able to answer you, but I do know of a being that may be able to answer your questions."

"Who is it?"

"The one with twisted karma, just like you – may be able to answer your questions."

"I don't know who they are."

"The quickest way would be to go ask Prescan... but that's practically impossible. How about you go find another 'god'?"

"God?"

"Yes. Msh did not reply to your questions. To be exact, he avoided answering them. However, other gods may be able to answer you."

Oh.

Sungmin moaned shortly and nodded his head. The god of time in Drimoor. If it was the god of time that he learned of through Msh, they may be able to answer Sungmin's questions. "...Okay."

“I wonder if my words helped you?”

“They were sufficient.”

When Sungmin said that, a knock sounded from the door. When Kim Jonghyun glanced at the door, it opened.

“Mr. Lee Sungmin?”

On the other side of the door was one of the mages.

“Sir Lloyd has regained consciousness. He has said that he wants to meet you. Can you come with me?”

Hearing that, Sungmin looked at Kim Jonghyun. Kim Jonghyun nodded with a laugh.

“There’s nothing more to talk about with me, is there?”

“...Thank you for telling me those things.”

“It’s nothing. Come again next time. I rather like you.”

Kim Jonghyun smiled.

T/N: The word “Demonic” And “Magical” are the same. (魔). So technically, ‘magic’ is ‘demonic arts’, and ‘magic armor’ is ‘demonic armor’.

Also, ‘spellcraft’ – the original word is 주술/呪術 (does ‘jujutsu’ ring a bell?), which *apparently* is a primitive form of magic specifically related to chanting/incantations. (I had a hard time bringing up that word until Frozen told me that word. Thanks Frozen!) (Wikipedia REALLY wasn’t helping.)

I haven’t read ahead and don’t know what it’s about, so the translation might change later.

Also some background info on my translations:

In Korean 마술 (‘majutsu’) usually refers to magic tricks. Yes, the ‘slight of hand’/‘card trick’ stuff. 마법 (‘mahou’) is the ‘real’ magic (the thing that makes fireballs). Following

that, 마술사('majutsushi') is 'magician' who professional does 'magic tricks' for a living, and that is why I went with 'mage' for most of my translations of the word 마법사('mahoushi').

Chapter 65

Heart (6)

“I’m indebted to you.”

Lloyd was laying down on a large bed. His depleted mana had recovered to some extent, and his wounds had healed as well, but it wasn’t as if his mental fatigue had recovered, so he looked very tired.

“It’s fine.”

“No, I really am in your debt. If you hadn’t helped me... I would have died all alone, deep underground. Nor would I have been able to destroy that heart.”

Lloyd spoke with a bitter smile. Hearing that, Sungmin flinched inwardly, taking care not to look suspicious. Didn’t Kim Jonghyun say it? That even other mages would not be able to see the heart that he now possesses.

“I heard you were the only survivor.”

“Ah... yes. I was lucky.”

As Kim Jonghyun had said, Lloyd didn’t seem to have realized that Sungmin had acquired the Black Heart. Not only that, he didn’t even notice that Sungmin had a soul with a twisted karma. If even the Gold Tower Lord wasn’t able to see through this, the only people who should be able to see through his twisted karma would be black mages at an incredible level.

“You indeed were lucky. Prescan, he... is a lunatic. It’s an incredible feat to survive under his hand.”

“About that... the lich called Prescan. What was he doing inside that dungeon?”

“Hm?”

Lloyd widened his eyes at Sungmin’s question. When a doubtful gaze was directed at him, Sungmin immediately controlled his expression. He looked at Lloyd with admiration and a bit of fear.

"If you are the Gold Tower Lord, shouldn't you be at the peak of power even in the mage guild?"

"Uhm. Well, not exactly... I guess I should be in the top 5."

"I can't understand. You fell with heavy injuries even at your level. Just what was Prescan doing in that dungeon?"

"...Well... I guess it isn't really a secret."

Muttering that, Lloyd sighed.

"The ultimate life."

His answer was the same as Kim Jonghyun's.

"It was like that since 10 years ago. Prescan was researching into the ultimate life, and broke the taboo in order to achieve it. Originally, he should have died along with his exile... but thanks to his escape, I was tasked with pursuing him. And I was able to find his dungeon after 10 years of pursuit."

Lloyd paused for a moment and sighed again.

"...During these ten years... Prescan has produced considerable results in his research. Originally, there were two hearts. One of them... transformed into a young girl in front of me... she was terrifyingly strong."

"A young girl, you say?"

"On the outside, she looked to be no more than ten or eleven, but she was... very strange. She dispelled my magic without a single chant, her arms and legs changed shape... but the most terrifying of all, is that the girl cannibalized a heart."

"A heart?"

"Yeah. She said she was hungry... and ate it right in front of me."

Sungmin recalled Xeon's corpse that had a hole in his chest. Listening to Lloyd's story, Sungmin subconsciously pressed down on his chest. The Black Heart was now inside his body, thumping. He was newly made aware that his heart belonged, or belongs, to a monster.

"Due to that Prescan escaped. Without that freakish girl, I would have been able to kill Prescan at least once. Perhaps I would have even been able to track down his phylactery. Whew! No, I guess I should consider myself lucky to be alive right now."

Lloyd looked at Sungmin as he muttered that. He took a bow towards Sungmin.

"Thank you for helping me. As I promised, I wish to compensate you for this matter... is there anything you want? I can't promise absolutely anything, but I will try to fulfill your desire to the best of my abilities."

Sungmin hesitated at those words. The Gold Tower Lord granting him a request was something like a blank cheque.

However... he didn't really have much to ask for. He thought about getting some magic texts, but he had no leisure to learn magic, when he had his hands full with martial arts. As for artifacts, he didn't know what kind of things there were, nor did he need anything right now.

"...Can I ask later?"

"So you want me to owe you one?"

Lloyd asked with a chuckle.

"Ah! I didn't mean that. I... just don't have anything I need right now."

"Well, it is what it is. Alright. I'll be at the Gold Tower, so come find me when you want to ask me something."

"Weren't you tracking Prescan?"

"There's no way a mage would do that himself."

Lloyd giggled at Sungmin's question.

After his conversation with Lloyd, Sungmin returned to the mercenary guild. Sungmin carefully explained what happened in the dungeon. Whether it was Jo Young or the others, they could only accept Sungmin's story as the truth. After all, it was true that everyone other than him was killed.

Due to the massacre in the dungeon, the Behengerr mercenary guild received a big hit. The guildmaster, Bern, had died, and the SS-rank mercenary Xeon had died as well. Numerous other S and A-rank mercenaries died as well. With the death of Xeon and his men, the Corona mercenaries had practically disbanded.

Only at dawn was Sungmin able to leave the guild. After arriving at his home, Sungmin sighed in fatigue.

'I should leave Behengerr soon.'

Sungmin sat down in his room. His first objective was to go find the god of time, Denir, in Drimoor.

However, before that, Sungmin took out the spatial pouches he got this time. Only money and potions were in the pouches of the other mercenaries. Although that was a bit of a pity, any disappointment he had washed away when he took out the Lesser and Greater Restoration pills from Xeon's pouch.

Sungmin gulped and put his hand out towards the Lesser Restoration pill. He was planning to consume it now. Although he had experience consuming pills before, the Lesser Restoration pill should be at a completely different level in terms of effect compared to the Sacred Pill he consumed back in Xenavis.

Sungmin opened the wooden chest with a revering mind. Then, he took out the pill with both of his hands.

When he put it inside his mouth, the pill melted before he could chew. Sungmin immediately started circulating the Purple Cloud Divine Art after gulping it down.

"...Huh?"

Before he circulated the Purple Cloud Divine Art, Sungmin opened his eyes and looked down at his body. He... couldn't feel a thing. When he consumed the Sacred Pill, he was able to sense its efficacy immediately. He had a hard time turning the enormous amounts of qi into his meridians and into his dantian.

But this time, that didn't happen.

"...What the?"

Sungmin sat down in a meditative stance again and circulated his qi. He picked on the internal cultivation in his dantian according to the scripts of the Purple Cloud Divine Art.

Sungmin became speechless and looked down at his body. Inside his dantian... he could feel an enormous amount of energy. When he became conscious of it, he could

feel the minute changes that his body had experienced. His dantian had became much larger, and his cultivation was several times that of before.

Sungmin realized the identity behind it. It was the qi inside the Lesser Restoration Pill. The pill he had consumed did not go through any sort of refinement process and was stored in his dantian. This was absurd. All pills required refinement. Usually, making half of the qi inside a pill one's own would be considered a great feat.

'I didn't even circulate it, but the qi was extracted on its own. Just why...?'

The Black Heart – Sungmin exclaimed out loud and nodded his head. This seemed to be one of the abilities of the Black Heart – absorbing the qi inside a pill as it is. Although he didn't know the mechanisms of it, this was what Sungmin was feeling right now.

'But also... Wiji Hoyeon said to me. That the art she learned, Heavenly Demon Divine Art, does not go through the required refinement process that every other art goes through.'

Wiji Hoyeon said that that was an ability unique to the Heavenly Demon Divine Art, and that a special constitution was required to learn the art. Did his constitution change to something like that after consuming the Black Heart? Sungmin circulated the Purple Cloud Divine Art just in case.

He did it for several hours, but he couldn't feel much change to the fact that he was refining the qi in nature. Perhaps this wasn't about constitution, but something unique to the Heavenly Demon Divine Art.

It was still too early to be sure of anything, so Sungmin took out the Greater Restoration Pill. He was consuming both the Lesser and Greater Restoration pills. Sungmin opened his mouth and swallowed the Greater Restoration Pill. Although it was slightly larger than the other pill, it also dissolved and flowed into his throat as soon as it entered the mouth.

As he was paying attention this time, he was able to notice the changes. The thick qi that came through his throat flowed through his meridians and reached the dantian before being stored. Sungmin's body trembled from the filling sensation.

He had completely consumed the Lesser and Greater Restoration pills. His internal

cultivation was now several times than what he possessed originally. This also meant that Sungmin had overcome one of his fatal weaknesses.

It had been merely four years since Sungmin started learning martial arts. Although he received Wiji Hoyeon's cultivation, and gained some more through the Sacred Pill, he was lacking severely in his cultivation compared to the level he was at. This was because he broke through to the peak-realm in an incredibly short period of time on Mount Msh. Compared to other martial artists who reached that realm through more than a decade of cultivation, he was sorely lacking in his cultivation.

But now, that weakness of his had disappeared. In fact, he now possessed internal cultivation enough to dominate other martial artists at the same level, or even a few steps above him. When he checked on his cultivation base after circulating for a while, it was already morning. Even though he hadn't slept a wink, he felt as refreshed as though he had gone through a deep sleep.

Since he had absorbed both of the pills, he thought about go finding Kim Jonghyun to dispel the curse on the magic armor, but before that, Sungin took out the Hundred Steps Divine Fist, the Bodhidharma Cultivation technique, and the Arhat movement art. He ignored the last two, and opened the Hundred Steps Divine Fist and started reading it.

Shooting qi outwards was an incredibly difficult thing to do. It required a very high level of control, and was incredibly burdensome on one's cultivation. The Hundred Steps Divine Fist of the Shaolin was a fist art that could attack from a hundred steps away; the principle was to exert qi with the fist techniques to fire it. As Sungmin was currently unable to expel qi, learning the Hundred Steps Divine Fist was very helpful to him. Since the entire art was focused on shooting out qi, he would be able to use the method and apply it elsewhere if he managed to learn it.

Although the other two arts were splendid techniques as well, Sungmin didn't have any desire to learn them. After memorizing the Hundred Steps Divine Fist, Sungmin summoned Nevel.

"You called?"

Nevel popped out from his shadow, taking a bow. Sungmin spoke while giving Nevel the martial arts texts.

Basically, ‘cultivation’, in this case, short for ‘internal cultivation’, refers to ‘qi inside one’s body’ aka ‘qi that has been refined’. ‘qi’ usually refers to a more general type of energy. Like in nature. When it enters the human body and is refined, it isn’t referred to as ‘qi’ anymore. It’s ‘internal cultivation’. (Does ‘neigong’ ring a bell? Tell me if there’s a better translation... I don’t really like using the word ‘cultivation’, and refrained from using it, but I had to...)

‘martial artist’ is also just ‘cultivators’...but no. I won’t use that word

Chapter 66

Kin (1)

“Hmm.”

Nevel received the martial arts manuals from Sungmin and flipped through them.

“Arts of the Shaolin Temple. Hundred Steps Divine Fist, Bodhidharma Cultivation Art, Arhat Movement Art... they can’t be called peerless arts, but they are definitely valuable.”

“How much can I get from selling them?”

“I don’t recommend selling them.”

Sungmin’s eyes widened at Nevel’s words.

“They can’t be sold?”

“No, it’s not that. We buy all the things that our customers want. Even if it doesn’t sell well. However, in those cases, we offer market price...”

Saying that, Nevel smiled bitterly.

“There’s a lot of Shaolin arts on the market, especially in cases of the Hundred Steps Divine Art, Bodhidharma Cultivation ART, and Arhat Movement art. There’s too much stock. We sell our purchases through merchant guilds or the black market.

But... As the Shaolin Temple is a famous sect, there is a lot of stock for their martial arts. If you so wish, I will buy them, but it will be hard to get their proper price.”

“It’s that bad?”

“It’s the Shaolin after all. Oh... if it’s alright with you, may I know where you got these from?”

“...Do I have to?”

“I am your exclusive mediator, sir Lee Sungmin. Regardless of how you got your hands on these arts, I will not tell that fact to anyone. The reason I’m asking is because my advice to you will change according to where these arts are from.”

Sungmin thought about it when he heard that. He didn’t need to be worried though.

In the first place, the circumstances on his acquisition of those arts was purely circumstantial, and it wasn't like Sungmin killed Xeon for those arts.

"...The original owner of these manuals died, and I was able to find these while collecting his body."

"Then I advise you to take them back to the Shaolin Temple."

Said Nevel.

"The Shaolin Temple is a well-known righteous sect. Even amongst the ten righteous factions known as the nine sects and one band, their will to uphold justice is particularly strong. They are a traditional buddhist sect, so they are far from malicious deeds. If you bring these manuals back to the Shaolin, they will compensate you even if it's for their face."

"What kind of compensation?"

"With these, they will probably give you a Lesser Restoration Pill. A Greater Restoration Pill is stretching it. As you will be making ties with the Shaolin, it won't be bad at all. And also, honestly speaking... even if we buy these manuals from you, it will not be enough to buy a Lesser Restoration Pill."

Sungmin was slightly disappointed at Nevel's reply. Three manuals, and they weren't enough to buy a single Lesser Restoration Pill.

'...Where was the Shaolin Temple again?'

Sungmin combed through his memories. The nine sects and one band had branches in various places, but they all had a main mountain. The main mountain of the Shaolin Temple was located in a quite far away city called 'Brethun.'

'Brethun is quite close to Drimoor... I should go to Brethun and head to Drimoor from there.'

it seemed that going to the main sect rather than the branch sect was better if he was going to return those manuals. Deciding on what to do with the manuals, Sungmin asked just in case.

"Is there perhaps, someone with a twisted karma like me amongst the members of Erebris?"

Originally, someone with Sungmin's capabilities had no right to become a member of Erebris. He was told that he wasn't qualified even at the peak-level, so it implied that becoming a member of Erebris required someone to be at the exceed-level at minimum. In terms of mages, it would be the archmage-level.

According to Prescan, the other being that Prescan had met with a twisted karma like Sungmin was a freak that Prescan couldn't even hope to go against. There was a possibility that someone at that level was a member of Erebris as well.

"...That's... hard for me to answer. Information about other members is a prioritized secret."

"You can't even tell me if there is one or not?"

"Yes. I must apologize."

There were no results. Unless he met Prescan again, there was no way for him to know who had a twisted karma like he did.

After sending Nevel back, Sungmin sighed. Although he was concerned about a lot of things, it didn't mean that his way forward was blocked. For now, he had clearly decided on where to go next. He would go to Brethun and visit the main sect of the Shaolin Temple, and return the martial arts manuals. If he was lucky, then he would be able to receive a Lesser Restoration Pill in exchange.

After absorbing the Greater and Lesser Restoration Pills without losses, Sungmin's internal cultivation had leaped forward. However, an increase in energy didn't mean becoming stronger. Right now, Sungmin was nowhere close to the bottleneck at the end of peak-level.

'I'm still... far from strong.'

The events at the dungeon told Sungmin of reality; that his existence was puny and weak. After reaching the peak-level, and defeating the ogre chimera so easily... Sungmin thought that he had become very strong.

However, reality told him otherwise. There were plenty of people stronger than him. Although Prescan was a lich and once the Tower Lord of the Black Magic Tower, being toyed around with felt uncomfortable.

What if it was Wiji Hoyeon?

No, there was no need to bring her here. Even Baek Sogo was much stronger than Xeon. From the moment Sungmin stepped onto that mountain, Baek Sogo already had the capabilities beyond the peak-level. Perhaps she had already reached the exceed-level.

To prevent Baek Sogo's death in 7 years in that dungeon, to block Wiji Hoyeon, he was still lacking too much. He had to become even stronger.

'I couldn't get any help from the magic armor. No, I guess in this case I am fortunate?'

He should be considered fortunate since he didn't undergo that forceful contract. Sungmin sighed and looked down at the magic armor that clad his body. It was good that he got to wear it, but...

"How am I supposed to take it off?"

Sungmin grumbled.

†

Two days later, Lloyd left Behengerr. After the large damage, Jo Young took position as the temporary head of the mercenary guild. However, according to rumour, it seemed that Ludd will take his place once he comes back from a request. Jo Young himself refused to take the position saying that he was not qualified.

Sungmin's name was also mentioned when talking about the next head of the branch head, but Sungmin said no until the end. He couldn't be bound to Behengerr.

Once the matters at the mercenary guild were somewhat closed, Sungmin headed to the mage guild. He was going to ask Kim Jonghyun to dispel the curse on the armor.

"It's done."

Kim Jonghyun returned the magic armor after dispelling the curse. Sungmin received the armor and exerted his internal cultivation into it. The magic armor opened up, covering his body. Although the contract had been removed, the enchantment on the armor itself was as before. Exerting his internal cultivation would allow him to wear it, while taking it off was the same.

“I plan to leave Behengerr soon.”

“Is that so? Where are you thinking of going?”

“For now, I’m going to go to the main sect of the Shaolin Temple in Brethun.”

“That’s quite far. It’ll take months at least to reach Brethun from here.”

“I have some business there.”

“Do you have ties with the Shaolin?”

“Yes.”

Sungmin didn’t bother to explain himself. Kim Jonghyun laughed and nodded his head.

“I thought that you and I could become close, but it’s a pity that we have to depart like this.”

“...Well, we’ll meet again if fate allows us to, no?”

“That’s true. I don’t plan to stay in Behengerr forever either. Oh... and also.”

Kim Jonghyun who was nodding, looked at Sungmin’s face.

“Scarlett Lecir. I heard that she was leaving Behengerr as well... are you going with her?”

“What?”

“Guess not. You two looked quite close after all. I thought you were in *that* kind of relationship.”

Scarlett was leaving Behengerr? A few days ago, when he chatted with Scarlett, she never said that to him. Kim Jonghyun shrugged his shoulders seeing Sungmin confused.

“Well, I’m not her, so I shouldn’t talk much about it. Why don’t you ask Miss Scarlett directly?”

Since he had become quite close to Scarlett, he was planning to visit her before he left. Sungmin left Kim Jonghyun’s room and headed to Scarlett’s. When he knocked on her door a few times, the door slammed open

“What is it?”

Scarlett opened the door and glared at Sungmin. Sungmin flinched a little from the gaze, but was surprised after looking at her room he could see over her shoulder. The

messy room had been cleaned and looked like some other room entirely.

“...I heard you were leaving. Is that true?”

“Who told you that? Oh, I guess I don’t need to ask. It’s that lunatic Kim Jonghyun, isn’t it? Why does that guy blabbering about other people’s matters?”

Scarlett grumbled and scratched her head. Seeing the red hair being tortured by her nails, Sungmin realized something. According to his memory of his previous life, there were no rumors about how Scarlett Lecir once lived in Behengerr. She would only stay here for a short while and leave soon. Sungmin had also predicted this to some extent. He just didn’t realize that it would be now.

“I can’t train in the city. I didn’t know this before, but apparently it suits me better to train in uh... slightly dirty places or mountains rather than in the city.”

“Are you planning to go to Mount Msh again?”

“Are you crazy? Why would I go back there? I’m never going back there again. That stupid place. Urgh... And also, you don’t seem to know, but leaving Mount Msh after training and going back there means that the previous prohibitions will continue. Do you know that that is? If I go back to Mount Msh again, I’ll have to continue with those damned penalties.”

He didn’t know that, but it did make sense. If the handicaps were reset by leaving the mountain, there would be ways to abuse the system.

“In any case, I’m not going back there. For now... I’m planning to travel around. Then I’ll find a place I like and start training for real.”

“Oh... so that’s it.”

“You came here to ask me that? Why, you thought I’d leave without even telling you?”

Scarlett started laughing.

“I’m not that cold. It’s just... yeah. I didn’t even get myself ready to leave, and I was planning to tell you when I got ready.”

“...Is that so? That’s good. Actually, I was also planning to leave Behengerr, so I came here to say goodbye.”

“What? Leave Behengerr? Where would you go after leaving here?”

“...There’s no reason for me not to.”

“So where are you going, then?”

“For now, to Brethun.”

"Brethun? That's awfully far. Have you been there before?"

"No, but a map should..."

"Then we should go together"

Scarlett interrupted him. Sungmin widened his eyes at her words and looked at her.

"...What?"

"Let's go together. I was also planning to travel around. It should be better with someone to talk to than going alone, right? It's not so lonely either."

"Th, that's true, but..."

"Why, you think I'll drag you down?"

Scarlett laughed as she said that. She raised her hand and smacked Sungmin's head.

"Don't be cocky, kid. I should be much stronger than you, you know? In fact, you'll have an easier time travelling with me. I would be able to protect you if someone strong appears."

"No, but I'm an S-rank mercenary and a peak-level expert..."

"Oh, are you now? You rude kid. Just say 'thank you' and obediently come with me."

Sungmin felt complex.

He was nearing thirty at his core, but was being treated as such by someone younger.

'...No, wait.'

"Oh yeah, how old are you?"

"You want to die?"

Scarlett suddenly glared at him when he asked that out of pure curiosity.

"You don't ask a woman her age."

It seemed that she was older than she looked.

T/N: Nine sects and one band – These ten 'organizations' belong to the 'righteous faction'. They like to uphold justice. But then, there are plenty of novels that criticize

the hypocrisy of their justice...

The nine sects are – Shaolin, Wudang, Huashan appear all the time, and different authors will use different sects for the remaining ones. (Turning Korean characters into Chinese Pinyin is a pain, so I won't do the rest.) They are also all seem to be based in mountains... hence 'main mountain'.

The one 'band' is 'beggars band'. (Sorry, that's the literal translation...) In Korean martial arts novels, this is the 'information agency' of sorts... joining this 'band' requires one to get rid of all of one's money... typically. Also, no one disrespects them just because they are a 'beggar' band.

Also, the 'kin' in the title is the 'kinship' kin. It's not a name or anything...

Chapter 67

Kin (2)

He was thinking of saying goodbye to Ludd once he came back, but since he didn't know when he would come back from his mission, it would be a waste of time to wait indefinitely in Behengerr.

Since there was no news of Ludd even after 3 days of waiting, Sungmin decided to leave Behengerr on the spot. It wasn't like he had any luggage. The house wasn't his, nor was any of the furniture inside it.

The only thing he prepared before leaving Behengerr was some food that would allow him to survive for several days in an emergency. He didn't take much either. Although he had a spatial pouch, he didn't want to increase his luggage any more than was necessary.

"You're packed light."

Scarlett didn't seem to like that very much though, as she who he had met up at the northern gate screamed 'traveller' no matter which angle one saw her from. She was wearing a large, hooded robe, with a bulky bag on her back.

Sungmin was flabbergasted looking at her.

"...Do you not have a spatial pouch?"

"This *is* my spatial pouch."

She said, pointing at the bag on her back. This was the first time Sungmin saw a spatial pouch of such size.

"...Do you have a lot of luggage?"

"I'm not simply traveling. I'm traveling in order to look for a place I could settle down and do my research. Of course I have a lot."

She said while tapping on her bag. Sungmin approached her and extended his hand

towards her bag.

“I’ll carry it for y...”

“Don’t get cocky. I never told you to. I’ll carry my own luggage.”

Scarlett slapped on Sungmin’s hand and snarled at him. Sungmin flinched and took a step back and looked at her face. Although he had met her a few times during the 3 months in Behengerr, Sungmin didn’t at all know what kind of personality Scarlett Lecir had.

“Let’s go, then. I’ve already rented a carriage.”

“We’re taking carriage?”

“Of course. No way, were you going to walk all the way to Brethun?”

When Scarlett asked back, Sungmin had nothing to say. In actuality, he had been thinking more of a horse than a carriage.

“I borrowed the carriage with my own money. I won’t ask you to pay for it, so don’t worry. Oh... I wasn’t able to get a coachman though. Can you drive a carriage?”

“Ah, yes. I can.”

“That’s good.”

When he was a low-rank mercenary in his previous life, he learned all sorts of skills related to menial labor to participate in as many missions as possible. He also learned to drive a carriage back then.

Scarlett was unexpectedly very strict in preparation. The horses on the carriage were very healthy, and the state of the carriage was very good as well. Although maintenance would be required since they were going on a long-distance journey, he thought that he would be able to drive the carriage without issue for a while.

“Then... which way are we going?”

Sungmin took out a map and a compass. Although Eria was enormous and the map wasn’t that accurate, setting a general direction with it wouldn’t pose a problem.

“Go wherever you want. I don’t have a destination in mind.”

Scarlett put her large bag inside the carriage. Then, she looked at Sungmin and took

off her hood.

"Nothing, it was just getting stuffy inside my room. It doesn't matter where you go."

Sungmin glanced at her with a strange gaze at Scarlett's words. He may have been mistaken, but he felt a slight bitterness in her words.

"What are you doing? Go."

Scarlett sat next to Sungmin, who was the coachman. Sungmin coughed awkwardly for a moment and pulled the reins.

The carriage started moving slowly.

†

He barely survived.

Lloyd who attacked the dungeon, had become even more of a freak than he was 10 years ago. It wasn't that Prescan was playing around during the past decade, but the 10 years they each spent created only widened the gap between them.

'But I still lived.'

Damned freak. He wasn't even a lich. If something like a genius existed in the field of magic, then it must refer to Lloyd. Prescan was certain. Lloyd was more of a freak than any other mage he had seen.

However, he had survived. That was what mattered. This time... he was too unlucky. If Prescan was in his perfect state, he would have been able to kill Lloyd. Though, once that happened, the mage guild would be flipped over and would try to kill him at any costs.

'I wasn't at my peak state, so we were barely even... no, I was outmatched a little. That insane freak...'

If Prescan wasn't a lich and was an ordinary mage, he would have died in that dungeon. In the battle with Lloyd, Prescan was pushed to the brink of death. Once he died once, he would lose an enormous quantity of magic energy, so he chose to flee. Although it

was a pity that he wasn't able to kill Lloyd, he would be chased by the mage guild regardless of whether he killed Lloyd or not.

Prescan felt more joy than pity. In front of him was a little girl with long black hair, looking at a mirror. Although the clothes on her suited her well, the girl didn't seem to like it so much.

"Aine."

Prescan carefully called out to the girl. He wanted to create the ultimate life. He researched for decades with that as the goal, and his research recently came to fruition in the form of that chimera girl. He named her Aine. Although she was the crystallization of Prescan's life-long goal, Aine was too unstable. Both her body and her heart. Although he was tuning her afterwards, it was impossible to tune Aine perfectly with his current capabilities.

"Aine."

Only after he called out to her once more did she look back to Prescan. Her body and soul were not in harmony with each other. But what was an even bigger problem, was that Aine didn't listen to Presan that well. Perhaps the seal of obedience wasn't engraved properly as he had to hurry with imbuing her soul into the heard and body. Although there were a lot of problems, he wasn't able to tune Aine right now.

Prescan was injured too heavily. Although liches weren't bound to their bodies, an attack from an archmage was able to mortally wound Prescan. He would only be able to recover from his wounds after a long period of recuperation. Although the seal of obedience was incomplete, it was still present, evidenced by the fact that Aine didn't kill Prescan.

"Off you go."

"Okay."

Aine nodded her head slightly. Although she didn't seem to like it so much, she didn't go against Prescan's words that badly.

Aine's body disappeared in front of Prescan's eyes. It wasn't magic. She only moved at an incredible speed. Prescan sighed and collapsed onto the ground.

The place Prescan fled to wasn't that far away from where the dungeon originally was. It wasn't that he was aiming for a place where it was 'darkest under the lamp', but that he just wasn't capable of running further as he was in an urgent situation.

'The heart should still be there...'

Saying that, Prescan prayed that he was right. As he had to flee urgently, he wasn't able to get the other heart. Since he didn't kill Lloyd, he thought that the heart would be gone as well... but he sent Aine over just in case to check.

Having left Prescan's hiding place, Aine immediately headed to the dungeon. Midway, however, she stopped. She felt a strange sense of unfamiliarity from her heart beating inside her chest. Aine frowned and pressed down on her chest. Amidst the discomfort akin to something crawling beneath her skin, Aine turned her head.

Not too far away, something was attracting Aine's senses. What should she do? Prescan – her father – asked her to check whether the other heart was still in the dungeon or not.

'Later.'

Aine delayed Prescan's request without a shred of hesitation.



Since the sun was about to set, he stopped the carriage. If he forced the horses and the carriage throughout the night, the horses would tire out faster and the carriage would wear out faster as well. Sungmin stopped the carriage at a decent place and tied up the horses.

"Let's stay here for the night."

"Okay."

On their way here, he didn't talk a lot with Scarlett. While Sungmin was riding the carriage. Scarlett read magic texts next to him. Even though the roads were rough and the ride wasn't easy, her reading continued. As expected of a future archmage. Her concentration was top-notch.

"...Are you familiar with camping?"

"That's a strange question. I've lived in Mount Msh for nearly 2 years. I couldn't wash, nor could I change clothes. Camping? Of course I'm familiar with it. I still feel like it's more comfortable sleeping on the floor than on the bed."

Tap. Scarlett closed the book she was reading and replied. The book she was reading on the way here was very thick and heavy, and was more of a blunt weapon than a book. She threw the book inside the carriage.

"Then, let's get ready for..."

"Ready? Ready for what?"

"Like gathering wood and..."

"What do you think mages exist for?"

At Sungmin's words, Scarlett asked back as though Sungmin was stupid. She looked around and extended her hand towards a nearby tree. Without even a chant, a magic was cast. A thick tree branch from the top snapped in half and flew towards Sungmin's feet. She then extended her hand again towards the branch on the ground with nonchalant face.

Poof! And the branch was lit on fire.

"Magic exists to replace menial labor. Not all magic is about killing people."

"Oh... yes."

"Sheeh, every single one of you martial artists are like that. They're so ignorant and let their bodies do the work. You know some magic, don't you? Then think about how to use them more proactively and more efficiently."

Scarlett grumbled before sitting down. Sungmin wasn't able to retort and obediently sat down opposite her.

"Haste, Strength, Fatigue Recovery, Mind Cleaning. Although these are basic magic spells, the possibilities and might of magic differs drastically according to those who use it. Hey, did you even think about using magic properly?"

"N, no. I only thought about using them as support for my martial arts..."

"That's where you are stiff in your reasoning. Just because you like martial arts and learn martial arts doesn't mean you're talented. Who knows, perhaps you might be more talented in magic than you are in martial arts."

Scarlett folded her arms as she said that. Sungmin wasn't able to come up with a reply

and stayed silent. It wasn't that wrong. Something 'you want to become good at' and something 'you are good at' were different things. When the two are the same, then that person was lucky, and perhaps called a genius.

In Sungmin's case, the two did not match, he wanted to do well in martial arts, but he wasn't able to. He had heard that he lacked talent too many times so he didn't even feel shameful about it.

"It will take months to reach Brethun anyway. I can teach you some useful magic on the way th..."

Scarlett's expression suddenly turned cold. Just a moment later, Sungmin had sensed it as well. His sixth sense warned him... no, it wasn't his sixth sense.

Inside his chest, his heart was in discomfort.

T/N: "Aine" is supposed to be pronounced like the German word "Eine" (Perhaps Japanese readers, if there are any, would be more familiar with "アイネ"?). But I don't want to have to write "Ainë" all the time...

Chapter 68

Kin (3)

A sudden gale assaulted their camp. Scarlett's small fire couldn't endure and was put out. Thankfully, the sun hadn't quite set yet and the sky was crimson, so there weren't any issues with visibility.

The black haired girl was standing right next to the fire. The place she was standing allowed her to attack both Sungmin and Scarlett.

When?

Both of them thought the same question at once. The girl's approach was so fast neither of them could recognize it.

Aine stood up from her crouching position. The fact that she was not in a state of hunger was a fortune for Scarlett and Sungmin.

Scarlett didn't know who the girl was, but felt the ominous feeling coming off her. That kind of feeling was very unfamiliar to her.

"...What are you?"

However, Scarlett wasn't fearful. One of her strengths – at the same time, a weakness – was that she acted like herself regardless of the situation. Scarlett distanced herself from Aine with a few steps.

'What are you doing?'

Scarlett acted as soon as she came to a guard, but Sungmin didn't. He only stood and looked at Aine. His thudding heart resounded loudly in his ears. Aine didn't move either. She blinked her yellow eyes and stared at Sungmin's face.

"...You..."

Sungmin's lips moved. This was his first meeting with Aine. However, she didn't feel unfamiliar to her. Even though they had never met before... he felt that he knew her. No, rather than that.

A sense of kinship.

"Who are you?"

Before he could ask, Aine asked him first. Aine was feeling the same thing that Sungmin was feeling. It was just that, her progression of emotions was different to that of Sungmin's. From kinship came discomfort. Sungmin was feeling the same discomfort by that point, but they differed in the way they handled their 'discomfort'.

It happened in an instant. Aine's hand seemed to twist in a strange way before turning into a tentacle, shooting towards Sungmin.

"Hey!"

Scarlett shouted out to Sungmin and she acted at the same time. She swung her hand, and magic energy rippled with it. The tentacle that aimed at Sungmin's heart changed course mid-way due to the interfering magic energy. Sungmin gasped deeply and took several steps back.

"Get yourself together! What the hell are you doing!"

Shouted Scarlett with a stiff expression. Sungmin sharpened his mind and moved. He picked up his spear from the floor, but he couldn't be relieved just yet.

Aine returned the tentacle back into her arm. She repeatedly gripped and loosened her hand while looking at Sungmin's face. Aine did not care about Scarlett's presence. She only looked towards Sungmin.

"There's something strange about you," muttered Aine.

When she reached out with her leg, a pitch-black magic energy shot up from beneath her. The ominous form made Scarlett bite her lips. She reached out inside her chest and took out a large pair of gloves and put them on.

"Who are you?"

Aine asked. Sungmin did not reply. Unfamiliarity, ominousness. And an unknown hostility. No, rather than that, the one in front of him was trying to kill him. He couldn't just let himself be killed.

"...Lee Sungmin."

"Lee Sungmin? Is that a name? I'm Aine."

Replied Aine. She frowned once, before smiling.

"So that's it."

That was the end of it. Aine's right arm changed form again. The right arm that ignored the balance of the human body and became a muscular monster arm. Seeing the punch flying towards him, Sungmin hurriedly used the Shadowless Phantom.

The increase in his internal energy allowed him to move faster. The punch hit the ground and spat earth and rocks everywhere. Sungmin swung his spear towards the cloud of dust approaching him.

The dust cloud settled. Beyond that, Aine once again swung her tentacle arm towards Sungmin. Sungmin realized who Aine was. The words that he heard from Lloyd passed by in his mind. It was about the chimera girl that could change the form of her limbs.

There was no time to think. The girl's attacks were strange and without pattern. The tentacle that flew towards him was thicker than a whip, yet sharp like a blade. Sungmin exerted his internal energy into his spear and deflected Aine's tentacle.

No, he thought to do so. Along with the pain that almost ripped his hands, the spear spun in reverse in his hands. Aine's attacks were incomparably stronger to the punch of the ogre chimera.

'I can't... deflect it!'

Because he consumed the Greater and Lesser Restoration pills, he was able to hold. If it was before he had consumed those, the attack would have ripped his arm away from his body.

She couldn't be taken lightly just because she looked young on the outside. The

opponent was a freak that drove the Gold Tower Lord Lloyd half to death. Sungmin barely gripped his hands and defended himself from Aine.

Meanwhile, Scarlett had finished her preparations for battle. Metallic symbols on the gloves on her hands emitted light. Scarlett licked her lips and reached out to empty air.

Every time she moved her fingers, characters were written midair. A yet-incomplete 'Spell Engraval' of the Lecir school was cast. Magic was cast through the red string of spells engraved into the air.

Just as Aine was about to attack Sungmin, she trembled, sensing the threat behind her back. The presence of Scarlett, whom she did had ignored, messed up her senses. A bird of fire created through a spell assaulted Aine's back.

"Uh...!"

Aine hurriedly turned around and extended her hand. The heart that moved Aine's body made her immune to most types of magic. This ability of hers was something that Prescan wanted his ultimate creation to have, and although incomplete, was capable enough to drive Lloyd almost to death.

However, the magic that Scarlett casted was fundamentally different to that of normal magic. Scarlett's Spell Engraval (呪文刻印) was a mixture of magic (魔法) and spellcraft (呪術), and was founded especially on Onmyoudou (陰陽道-Way of Yin and Yang) and Qimen Dunjia (奇門遁甲-A type of ancient Chinese divination) fields of spellcraft.

(T/N: I ain't translating that shit. There IS NO translation. Go to wikipedia)

Boom!

The firebird that clashed with Aine did not scatter but swallowed Aine's body whole. Aine's body flinched amidst ultra high-temperature flames. Aine did not know of pain, but still felt that the flames burning her body were uncomfortable.

Crunch.

Aine's body transformed inside the flames. If simple magic immunity didn't work, then she only needed to change her body so that it was inflammable. Her outer skin became

ash and fell on the floor, and below that was an armor-like skin.

“Body transformation...? Polymorph? No, wait. It’s not a dragon, right!”

Saying that, Scarlett waved her hand again. Due to her support, Sungmin was able to catch his breath, and calm down the tremor in his heart.

What made Sungmin’s heart chaotic was the existence of the heart inside his chest. The Black Heart – Sungmin didn’t know how he became one with this thing, but if the thing thumping inside his heart was indeed the pitch-black heart levitating inside the dungeon, if it was really that.

‘Aren’t I... the same as that little girl right now?’

The same as a freak that chewed on and ate a live heart?

He had no room to think about such things. Regardless of the reason, Aine was trying to kill him. The attack that aimed precisely at his heart could not be considered a cute greeting.

Let’s just consider this an opportunity, he thought. This was his first proper battle after he had consumed the Restoration pills. He no longer needed to restrain himself from using the Shadowless Phantom and Nine Skies Infinity Spear that used a lot of his internal energy.

When he approached Aine using the first move of the Shadowless Phantom, Traceless First Step, Aine was raising her head from a crouching position. Sungmin and Aine met gazes. Instinct, and sixth sense warned him. Sungmin retracted his spear and immediately moved sideways.

An invisible punch grazed past his ears. Even though it wasn’t a direct hit, his ears were in pain and his vision blurred momentarily. He could see Aine in a punching stance.

“...Hundred Steps Divine Fist?”

Aine did not reply to that question. However, she was showing discontent on her expression. After gripping and loosening her hands a few times, she went into a punching stance once again.

Then, another round of invisible fists started again. The Hundred Steps Divine Fist was not visible to the naked eye. However, the senses he trained in Mount Msh allowed him to dodge those attacks.

However, he couldn't focus on dodging. While she punched with her right, Aine changed form of her left hand and attacked Sungmin.

If Sungmin was alone, then he would not have been able to hold against Aine. However, he was not by himself. The fact that Scarlett stayed with Sungmin was a great fortune for him. Lecir School's Spell Engraval. Albeit incomplete, the magic of the Lecir school allowed Scarlett to become the lord of the Red Magic Tower at a young age.

On top of that, her natural affinity with Aine was also an element of luck. The current Scarlett was far from being on par with Lloyd, but the peculiarity of Spell Engraval gave Aine a tough time. Not only that, Prescan's help was absent, so it was natural for Aine to be disadvantaged.

A hand of earth shot out from the ground and grabbed onto Aine's leg. Aine, even while swaying, manage to swing her left arm. The tentacle ripped apart the air and attacked Sungmin. Sungmin lowered his stance and closed the distance with Aine. His spear attempted to pierce Aine's chest, and at that time, Aine twisted her torso, taking the spear hit with her left shoulder instead.

Crunch! There was a sound of muscles and flesh being ripped, and bones breaking. The moment Sungmin's spear hit Aine's left shoulder, Aine almost simultaneously swung her right arm to slice off her legs. Aine was pushed back, but did not roll on the floor. She immediately did a roll in the air, and when she landed, her severed legs had already regenerated.

"You're a freak."

Said Scarlett in an annoyed tone. Yes, annoyance, just that. She no longer felt a threat from that mysterious thing. Although the battle was short, it was enough to determine who was the advantageous one in this battle

"Yeah."

Aine's reply didn't seem to consider the disadvantageous situation at all. It wasn't that

Aine was ignorant.

It was the truth.

When Aine smiled, an enormous amount of magic energy rippled. Scarlett, who considered her side to be superior, realized how hasty she was in that decision. The scale of magic energy that Aine was giving out was beyond Scarlett's imagination.

"What kind of freak are you...!"

Scarlett frowned as she muttered that. Scarlett was not aware of the fact that the girl in front of her drove Lloyd, the Tower Lord of the Gold Magic Tower, almost to death.

Sungmin was in a frontal confrontation with that monster. The heart beating inside Sungmin's body, and the heart that Aine possessed were the same. However, just because they possessed the same hearts, they could not be considered to be the same species.

The enormous magic energy that Aine showed him was beyond what Sungmin was capable of understanding. Even though Sungmin wholly absorbed the energies inside the Greater and Lesser Restoration pills, the ominous magic energy Aine gave off was incomparably larger.

Such a freak was aiming for him. It wasn't the eyes that looked at the same kin. It was only a cryptic hostility, and it wouldn't end just with her gaze.

Sungmin did not want to die.

Chapter 69

Kin (4)

That was the only thing. He didn't want to die. He could not die. There was no reason to think about why at this point. He couldn't die already. He just couldn't. Sungmin heard Scarlett's warning in the distance. Gripping his spear, he lowered his stance.

Aine's fist techniques were unrefined. She was able to use all the martial arts that Xeon was capable of using, but that didn't mean that she was as proficient as him in using them. She had the same level of skill as him, but Aine herself was unused to using the fist.

However, her style of battle was one that made her cover up those deficiencies with enormous magic energy and the transformation of her body. If Scarlett did not support him, Sungmin would have died by her hands already.

No, perhaps right now.

A tentacle grazed past him. Sungmin's strength was too lacking to deflect Aine's attacks using basic moves; everything sounded distant to him; he forgot to breathe and charged forward; the tentacle changed shape and now rushed at him from behind; he could feel that with his sixth sense.

Shadowless Phantom, second move – Shadowless Step. His shadow danced around. Sungmin's body produced afterimages. With his forward momentum, he attacked with the first move of the Nine Skies Infinity Spear – Soultracer.

Aine did not avoid this. She met it head on with her armor-clad body. *Claaang!* Along with a metallic sound, the spear in Sungmin's hand trembled. Even though he exerted so much of his internal energy into it, he was incapable of penetrating Aine's armor-like body.

He didn't have the leisure to exert more strength and try to penetrate through the armor. Sungmin retracted his spear retreated. When he moved out of his place using the Shadowless step, Aine's fist struck where he had been.

Even the slightest of mistakes weren't allowed in this battle. Just like the time with the ogre chimera; no, even moreso. When he fought the chimera, Sungmin had some leisure to think, but nothing like that existed now.

'If Miss Scarlett wasn't here... '

That was what he thought – that he was so powerless. He realized this in Prescan's dungeon. How puny and weak were peak-level experts. He thought to himself that he had grown somewhat, though not so strong, but in actuality, he was just a puny existence.

The opponent was freakish enough to make him feel that.

Even though she possessed the same heart that Sungmin had, she was incomparably stronger. She killed Xeon and drove Lloyd almost to death.

'Would I be able to do it?'

Against Xeon, the leader of Corona Mercenaries? Or against Lloyd?

What would he gain from thinking such things? What would change from it?

He wanted to see the limits of martial arts.

He thought that. When he just left Mount Msh, Sungmin was under the assumption that he was walking on a lonely path of martial arts. He packaged himself, his lack of talent, his luck, and his encounters all as effort. Yes, back then, he was like that.

However, right now.

His weakness – What if it was Wiji Hoyeon, or Baek Sogo instead of me? – Thinking about other people was just running away from reality. He had half-given up putting in effort as well. Even though he resolved himself see the limits of martial arts, that he would exert the effort to do so; even though he resolved to train himself, he tried to break through his bottleneck relying on something like the magic armor.

Even though he never attempted to break through by himself.

This was because I now know reality – he said to himself several times before he slept. Doing missions was easy, but at most, they were S-rank. His skills did not improve, and neither did his achievements in martial arts. Outside of Mount Msh, hard effort wasn't rewarded the same. That was why, he ran – from effort; from training.

So, would he die now?

Boom! Sungmin's body rolled across the ground. The magic armor on Sungmin's body, albeit without its original function, still played a splendid role as a defensive item, fortunately. Without it, rolling on the floor wouldn't have been the end of it.

Despite that, his injuries were heavy. Although it didn't show on the outside, his internal injuries were rather critical. Aine jumped towards Sungmin rolling on the ground, and Scarlett hurriedly cast magic to interfere.

The internal pain, the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, the sounds of destruction all around, his aching head... the pounding of his heart in his chest.

Sungmin heaved a breath and stood up. His waist ached, be it was because he was hit, or from when he rolled on the floor, or both.

Night arrived, and the surroundings were dark. The magic that Scarlett was casting seemed amazing even from Sungmin's view, who was practically clueless about magic. Every time Scarlett's hands waved through the air, unknown characters filled the air and invoked magic.

Seeing that, Sungmin felt that the bitterness in his mouth was like poison. The thing coming out under his tongue was no saliva, but poison. He hated it. He hated himself for being powerless. Sungmin dragged his feet.

'I'

...Need to change. He wanted to change. He knew that the world changed as 'he' changed. He learned that in Mount Msh. At that time, he had definitely changed. The him before he entered Mount Msh and the him after he left Mount Msh had changed.

It was just that he was lacking. Some people, like, for instance, the so-called 'geniuses' have an easy time doing anything they do. Whether it was progressing forward, or being changed. Every step that a genius takes was equivalent to several or perhaps

several dozen steps for an ordinary man.

As someone who's not a genius, Sungmin had to keep walking forward. One realization was not enough. He had to come to several realizations.

About himself; and about reality. He needed to know how different his ideals and the reality in front of him were.

'I do.'

Connecting the disjointed thoughts he had, he gripped on his spear with whatever strength he had left. He knew that he was puny, that he was worthless, and that he was no genius. He also knew that the 'change' he experienced wasn't anything that great. Even though he acted like some hermit that decided to see the limits of martial arts, he fell too easily in front of a bottleneck.

Despite that, he was looking too high.

His goals were too idealistic.

He wanted too much.

Amidst his self-loathing, Sungmin quietly walked forward. Although Scarlett was an exceptional mage, her Spell Engraval was a field of magic that was incomplete. Thanks to that, the efficiency of magic energy consumption was not that good. Yes, the Qimendunjia and Onmyoudou-based Spell Engraval was an effective method of attack against Aine, who had magic immunity.

However, it lacked the decisive factor. With the firepower that the current Scarlett had, it was insufficient to deal a decisive blow. Aine possessed immense regenerative powers, and was enough to be called the ultimate lifeform. She recovered her injuries endlessly and pushed Scarlett back.

Sungmin watched that happen.

Amidst the disgusting self-loathing, he was pressed down by his own powerlessness. He hated it. And that dejection was what made him move. He didn't want to let Scarlett die. He didn't want to die either. There was a reason he couldn't die here.

He had not changed yet.

Aine, who was attacking Scarlett, suddenly sensed something sharp approaching behind her. Although it was a shallow attack that she could ignore, she turned around anyway. In the first place, what ticked her off was not Scarlett but Sungmin.

Aine did not know who Sungmin was. However, she didn't like him, and he kept ticking off her mind. She did not know how to solve these kind of troubles, and she had come to her own decision about this.

Wouldn't it stop if she killed him? Seeing Sungmin lashing out with his spear, she grinned. It was a light, and shallow attack, it wouldn't matter if she was hit by it head on.

As she thought, Aine's light swing of her hand easily deflected Sungmin's spear upwards. His palms ripped, and his elbows could barely hold, creaking. He instinctively spun around his chest in order to dodge Aine's sharp hands. *Screech* – and the section of armor around his waist was torn apart. A shallow wound on his waist gushed out blood. Any deeper, and his innard might have fallen out.

He couldn't be relieved yet. Aine was the predator, and he was the prey. The predator was now about to play around with her prey. A fight between a rabbit and a tiger was impossible. No matter how desperate the rabbit is, it would die with a single swing from a tiger.

Sungmin ran like a rabbit. Or perhaps, it might be more correct to say that he was a flea instead. He ran from Aine to survive. He endlessly stepped according to the ways of the Shadowless Phantom, and forced his arms to use the techniques of the Nine Skies Infinity Spear. Scarlett was no longer able to support Sungmin. She gasped and calmed down her magic energy, and only looked at Sungmin with complicated eyes.

Sungmin wouldn't resent her even if she ran away. However, Scarlett had no thoughts of fleeing. She was seriously considering whether to use her last resort.

Of course, Sungmin was not aware of this. Nor did he think about it. *Boom!* Sungmin's body flew backwards from Aine's kick. He almost fell down without any power in his legs, but he forced himself up. Black blood gushed out as he bit down on his lip. Aine giggled out loud. Her transformed hands were massive and razor-sharp.

His spear felt heavy.

This sense of heaviness was something he hadn't felt in a long time. He hadn't felt this way since Mount Msh. His body was heavy as well. His ears were being tortured, and the metallic scent of blood pervaded his mind.

Death.

Was this it? He wasn't able to meet Wiji Hoyeon again, he wasn't able to save Baek Sogo, and he got even Scarlett involved in it all too. A sudden death, like always. He still had some internal energy in his dantian. His body just didn't live up to the task. Sungmin suppressed the urge to laugh in self-loathing and pulled out his internal energy. He circulated... the Purple Cloud Divine Art. He circulated his energy. Watching as Aine ran towards him. He thought that, it still wasn't time for his death, just yet.

Why? Because he could still move.

There aren't many people that accept death as a joyous thing. If someone had the slightest bit of longing left, then they would not long for death. Even someone without any desire wouldn't be calm in front of death. Most people struggled in the face of death. Sungmin included. He struggled. He had numerous reasons he could not die here, and that became a longing for him which made him move.

There was no one that could save Sungmin here right now. There was no WIji Hoyeon or Baek Sogo. There was no Lloyd. To survive, he had to rely on himself. He could not rely on someone else. Like how the world changed with him changing, everything was up to him.

He felt that his head cleared up a little.

Scarlett came to a decision. She only had two conclusions she could come to. Either she fled, or she fought. Of those, fleeing was no option. The reason she still hesitated, was because it was too much of a waste.

However, she couldn't care about that in a situation like this. Scarlett clicked her tongue and reached inside her chest. But at that moment.

Purple fog was released from Sungmin's spear. Aine instinctively realized that it was dangerous, and immediately stopped to retreat.

The fog swirled around and was compressed into the spear. It became a lingering light around the spear. No, it also looked like a burst of flames. Aine, who saw that scene for the first time, watched as it happened with her eyes wide open. Sungmin, who had become pale after losing all that blood, looked down at the purple flames surrounding his spear.

He wanted to cry.

When he lashed outwards, he was not moving according to the Nine Skies Infinity Spear, but the first of the three basic moves, pierce. Yes. It was just a simple piercing action. Although it was not that fast, Aine was no longer able to ignore that attack. She met it with a stiff expression. Her hands, clad in armor, approached to defend against the spear.

She could not defend. The moment the spearhead came into contact with her armored hands, the armor scattered apart, and her hand was penetrated before the tip of the spear reached her. Speed and strength didn't matter any bit here. The spearhead pierced her right shoulder.

Aine screamed out loud. Although she did not know of pain, the feeling she had right now was strange. The wound was not regenerating. Aine changed her scream into a shout and swung her left hand. Sungmin took half a step back and spun his spear.

Aine's left arm was caught in the rotation and it was ripped off. Sungmin didn't need to exert his strength that much, and Scarlett turned stiff in her position. Aine's eyes widened in shock. Sungmin was not thinking complicated thoughts. He continued to attack Aine in the three basic moves of the spear, and Aine rotated her body in fear. The spear grazed past her waist and the grazed waist split apart and spurt blood.

"Ah, ah, it hurts!"

Aine screamed. Even though she wanted to cover up her wounds, she had neither of her hands. Aine jumped backwards, and then started fleeing without hesitation. Sungmin tried to chase her, but fell down without walking a few steps. His head was spinning, and he had a nosebleed. Scarlett also did not chase her and came to Sungmin.

"...Ah."

Sungmin did not see Aine as her figure became smaller. He only looked at the spear in his hand. The flames that clad the spear was no longer there.

“I did it.”

Letting go of his fading consciousness, he muttered those words.

What he used just now was spearforce.

Chapter 70

Kin (5)

He crawled.

He walked.

He ran.

His movement was slow. His body wasn't heavy, but he couldn't exert any strength. It was unknown whether it was time or his consciousness that was being dragged out, and it was a continuation of something strange. From one moment, Sungmin crawled, then walked, then ran, and wished to run faster.

However, he couldn't. The scenery around him passed him by slowly. No, in the first place, there was nothing like a scenery. The world that Sungmin was running inside was colored in pitch black. It was like the night without a single shred of light, and was similar to the darkness that Sungmin got used to back in Mount Msh.

He knew that he was running. He wanted to fly, but he was unable to. From one moment, Sungmin no longer ran and stopped. He started swinging his spear. From the three basic moves to the Nine Skies Infinity Spear, he moved according to the ways that he already had gotten used to.

Just once more.

He dearly wished for that. He remembered the spearforce he had managed to bring out, and tried several times to use it again. He exerted his internal energy in attempt to wrap his spear in purple flames.

Alas, it wouldn't.

He just didn't get how it worked. He didn't remember how he did it. He tried several times, only to fail. The internal energy in his dantian didn't move as though it was solid rock.

Just why? Was the spearforce at that time just a simple coincidence? Amidst the continuation of failures, Sungmin felt despair. From one moment, he was no longer holding the spear, nor was he moving. He was sitting on the floor, and the despair crushed his motivation. He thought that he would rot away like this.

When he opened his eyes, the sound of rain could be heard. Sungmin looked upwards. It was not the ceiling of the carriage. Sungmin breathed out, and realized that everything he had experienced until 'just now' was naught but a dream.

"You up?"

He heard Scarlett's voice. She was sitting down by a chair next to the window. She took off the glasses she was wearing and closed the book she was reading.

"You were out for 3 days. I thought you were going to die."

"...W-where...?"

He couldn't voice out properly. It seemed that it was true that he was out for 3 whole days, from the fact that his body was heavy. Not that Scarlett would lie about it.

"It's just a village that exists anywhere. Time was lacking to go to a city."

"Did you drive the carriage then?"

"I can drive the carriage too. Though, I just hate to. But what could I do? You had collapsed, so I had to do it."

Scarlett grumbled and stood up. She gazed at the rain outside.

"It's been raining since the morning. I think it'll stop by tomorrow... but the ground isn't too good after rain. I'm thinking we would be able to depart by the day after tomorrow at best. You only opened your eyes today too."

Saying those words, Scarlett approached Sungmin.

"I did call for a doctor of this village... but he wasn't that skilled. It's not like there's a healing mage, or a priest in this village. I did take care of your outer wounds with potions... check yourself out first."

He felt slightly dreamy even now, but Sungmin decided to move his arms like what

Scarlett said. The wounds he remembered were on his palms, elbow joints, left waist, and some ribs.

Sungmin's arms were supported by a splint. When he looked at Scarlett, she answered as if it wasn't much.

"I did that. I know emergency treatment."

Sungmin tried to move his arms carefully. Although it was rather tiring, there wasn't much strain in moving them. Potions didn't cure injuries perfectly. It worked very fast with grazes and cuts, but it was impossible to restore internal injuries and broken bones with them. The fact that the bones were put back together without much pain was a stroke of luck.

'No, perhaps it's the heart's ability.'

Sungmin did not know what kind of capabilities the Black Heart inside him had for sure. The things he confirmed were that he was able to lead the energies in spiritual pills directly into his dantian without refinement. Other than that, he knew nothing.

Aine, who had the same heart as him, was different to him in many ways. Aine possessed abilities that Sungmin could not use. From how she used the Hundred Steps Divine Fist, she probably stole that art from Xeon by eating his heart.

Sungmin didn't know how that was feasible, but Aine had many other abilities as well in her possession. Her limbs kept transforming in shape, while her body was capable of being covered by scale-like armor. Her physical abilities were beyond his, and she was able to recover from wounds instantly. Any of these were beyond normal human abilities.

She was different from Sungmin. Sungmin neither had the ability to transform his arms and legs, nor did he have an incredible regenerative capabilities. Although, he might have regenerative capabilities, albeit not the extent of Aine.

"I think I'm fine."

"What about your internal injuries?"

Scarlett approached him and untied the splints on his arms. Sungmin moved his arms a little before going into a meditative stance. He thought that he had received large

internal injuries battling Aine, but they had already recovered during these 3 days. This kind of speed was strange even considering that there was the help from the potion.

“Why didn’t you run?”

After circulating his internal energy slightly, Sungmin asked Scarlett. Scarlett dragged her chair and sat next to Sungmin, before laughing.

“Because I didn’t want to.”

“Wasn’t it a dangerous situation? If something went wrong...”

“Not really. It wasn’t any danger either... I also didn’t want to run, that’s all. I didn’t want to abandon you either.”

It looked as though Scarlett didn’t want to talk about it anymore, so Sungmin didn’t pry any further.

“Rather than that, what was that freakish kid? Why did she suddenly appear and attack us?”

“...It is probably because of me.”

Sungmin replied in a small voice. Scarlett’s eyebrows flinched at those words.

“What do you mean?”

Sungmin was indebted to Scarlett. She could have left Sungmin and just ran away, but instead chose to remain and help Sungmin. Without her help, Sungmin wouldn’t have been able to hold out against Aine.

Sungmin sighed and explained his relation with Aine. Scarlett bit her lips and listened to his story until the end. The matters at the dungeon, as well as the Black Heart that was now inside Sungmin’s body. And Aine, who probably possessed the same kind of heart. After listening to all that, Scarlett sighed and scratched the back of her head.

“...No wonder you met with that Kim JongHyun psycho frequently. It was because of that heart?”

“Oh... yes.”

“You are really unlucky. No, I guess you are very lucky in this case? In any case, your body is now better than before, isn’t it? I think that’s a suitable compensation to pay.”

"Even though I almost died?"

"There are plenty of people who want to gain opportunities like that risking their lives. You just need to not die in the future."

Scarlett grumbled before standing up.

"Consider yourself lucky. You just got a hell of an easier life thanks to being with me."

"...You mean you will come with me from now too?"

"What? Did you think that I'll stop going with you just because I heard your story? Looks like you got me completely wrong. I'm not that heartless, you know?"

Scarlett laughed. She picked up her glasses and book on the table by the window.

"Anyway. It's good that you don't look too bad. Originally... I was planning to leave after the ground dried a little after the rain, but it sounds like we don't have such a leisure. Let's go immediately once the rain stops tomorrow."

"Ah... okay."

"You don't have to be considerate of me. I have a way to save my own life no matter how dangerous it is."

Get some rest, she added, leaving the room. Naturally, she had another room to herself. She only stayed here to look after him.

When Scarlett left, Sungmin was left alone inside the room. He thought back to the words that Scarlett had said to him. He didn't know why Scarlett was undertaking so much danger to be with him. Scarlett also didn't seem to have any intentions on telling him, so asking her wouldn't do any good.

It was just that, from how he felt it, Scarlett's attitude had an affectionate reason behind it. It wasn't like the affection between a man and a woman.

Sungmin stopped thinking about that and carefully propped himself up. As he had been laying down for a long time, his whole body was stiff. It felt similar to the heavy feeling he felt back in the dream, and it brought the same discomfort with it.

He reached out to the spear on the wall, and thought about a lot of things, most of them about what he experienced in the dream. When he grabbed the spear, Sungmin took a deep breath. He calmed down his mind, and then...

He thought about the things he felt just before he fainted. Actually... he didn't know how he did it. He didn't use spearforce while knowing how to. He felt as though his head had cleared after all that self-loathing, and then.

He was suddenly able to use spearforce.

Tracing back to the things he felt back then, Sungmin agitated the internal energy inside his dantian. The energy he exerted into the spear became a purple fog and whirled around the spearhead. However, this was not enough. Sungmin kept exerting his energy. The fog became gradually thicker and started clumping up. Even more – trying to bring back those feelings back then, Sungmin exerted even more energy.

And at one point, the fog was completely compressed into one before becoming a lingering fire. Although this was much thinner and smaller than the spearforce he used in the battle with Aine, it was still true that he had reached the level of being able to use spearforce and not just enveloping his spear with energy.

This meant that Sungmin had overcome one of the sturdiest bottlenecks of the peak-level. Although using spearforce didn't make him an exceed-level expert, all exceed-level experts were able to use weaponforce. In other words, this meant that he was one step closer to the exceed-level.

'But it's still immature.'

This was an undeniable truth. The time he needed to create the spearforce was too long, and it required full concentration. It used up a lot of his energy as well, so it was impossible to maintain for long. Sungmin's first priority was to get used to forming spearforce.

Sungmin put down his spear. And then... cried a little. When he first used spearforce, he felt that he wanted to cry. He became touched that he had reached a level he had never even dreamed of in his previous life. Have I progressed a little? If so, then how much? One step? Or half a step?

That didn't matter. What mattered was that he took a step forward.

Sungmin kneeled down on and kept crying.

The rain was thinning out outside the window.

traitorAIZEN: the translator, Chamber, went into military service, with which he shall be back on April 8th 2020. I can only hope another translator picks this up.



PtFF by: traktorA7EN